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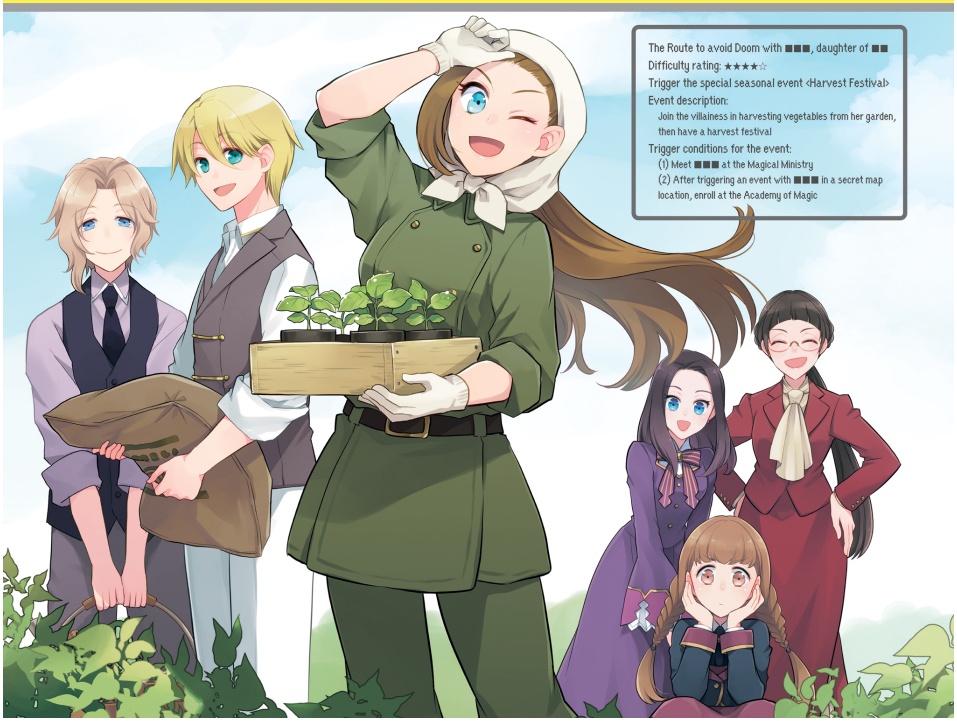
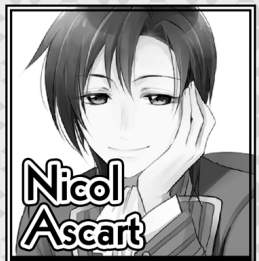
12
My Next Life as a VILLAINESS: ALL ROUTES LEAD TO DOOM!


The Route to avoid Doom with ■■■, daughter of ■■
Difficulty rating: ★★★★☆
Trigger the special seasonal event <Harvest Festival>
Event description:
Join the villainess in harvesting vegetables from her garden, then have a harvest festival
Trigger conditions for the event:
(1) Meet ■■■ at the Magical Ministry
(2) After triggering an event with ■■■ in a secret map location, enroll at the Academy of Magic

My Next Life as a VILLAINESS

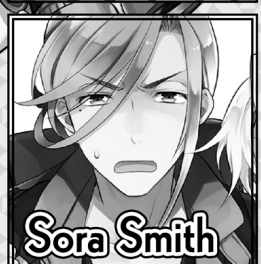
Katarina Claes

The only daughter of Duke Claes. Has a slightly menacing look (in her words: "villainess face"). Regained the memories of her past life and changed from a spoiled noble child into a wild, slightly problematic one. Simple-minded, forgetful, and easily carried away, but honest and loyal. Below average in both academics and magic. Earth Magic user.



Nicol Ascart

Son of Count Ascart, counselor to the King. Beautiful like a doll. Very loving brother. Wind Magic user.



Sora Smith

A young man who can use Fire and Dark Magic. Works at the Magical Ministry, where he uses the surname of Smith. One of the game's love interests, and likes Katarina.

★ Larna Smith

The director of the Magical Tool Laboratory and Katarina's superior. She is talented but weird.

★ Susanna Randall

The second daughter of Marquess Randall. The firstborn prince's fiancée.

★ Cyrus Lanchester

The serious and strict director of the Magic and Magical Powers Research Department. He is a romanceable character in FL2.

★ Pochi

A Dark Familiar who usually lives inside Katarina's shadow.

★ Raphael Wolt

A talented boy working at the Ministry. Has a very calm personality.

★ Alexander

A magical tool created by Larna. Physically appears to be a bear-shaped plush toy.

★ Dewey Percy

A child prodigy who skipped grades to end up working at the Magical Ministry. He is a romanceable character in FL2.

★ Luigi Claes

Duke Claes. Has a sweet spot for his daughter Katarina.

★ Jeffrey Stuart

Firstborn prince of the kingdom. Always smiling and relaxed, he comes across to most people as flippant.

★ Anne Shelley

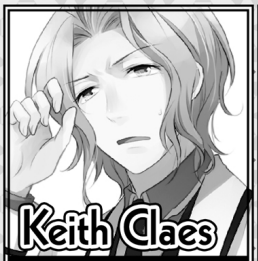
Katarina's maid. Has been serving her since Katarina was eight years old.

★ Fray Randall

Marquess Randall's daughter by one of his mistresses. A current member of the student council at the Academy of Magic.

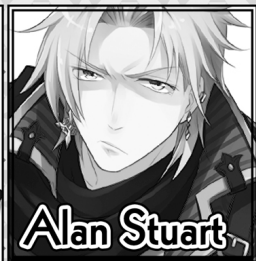
ALL ROUTES LEAD TO DOOM!

Characters



Keith Claes

Katarina's younger brother, adopted by Duke Claes from a distant branch of the family because of his magic prowess. Sensual and handsome. Earth Magic user.



Alan Stuart

Jeord's younger twin and the fourthborn prince. Ruggedly handsome and self-centered. Talented musician. Water Magic user.

Jeord Stuart

Thirdborn prince. Katarina's fiancé. Has the stereotypical good looks of a blond, blue-eyed prince, but has a calculating, dark personality. Met Katarina when he had lost interest in everything else. Fire Magic user.

Maria Campbell

A chosen girl who wields Light Magic despite being born a commoner. Hard worker and protagonist of the otome game. A very good baker.

Mary Hunt

Fourth daughter of a marquess and Alan's fiancée. Sweet and beautiful. Known as a paragon of ladylikeness among noble society.

Sophia Ascart

Daughter of Count Ascart, and Nicol's younger sister. Bullied by those around her because of her white hair and red eyes since childhood. Calm and collected.

★ Ginger Tucker

Baron Tucker's daughter. A current member of the student council at the Academy of Magic.

★ Sarah

A mysterious black-cloaked woman. Has been involved in several Dark Magic-related incidents.

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Chapter 1: Everyday Life

A little girl was running around the garden of Claes Manor as the warm sunlight poured down from above. I, Katarina Claes, felt my own heart brighten just by watching her enjoy herself.

On my day off from the Magical Ministry, I sat down in a chair placed in the garden, and soaked in the soothing sight of this child, while eating the sweets that had been prepared on the table in front of me. How can I even express what a wonderful time I was having?

As I grew more and more relaxed, the sight of the little girl caused me to remember my own childhood. I spent my life as the selfish, self-important daughter of a noble family—up until one day when I was eight years old. I fell down in the garden of a castle and regained the memories of my past life. The memories from my life as a high school girl in a country called "Japan."

As I grew accustomed to these memories, I became a thoroughly good girl. More seriously, I realized that this was the world of an otome game I had played in my past life until just before my death, a game called *Fortune Lover*.

Then I realized that I had been reborn as the game's villainess, whose every route would lead to a Bad End... In order to somehow avoid my doom, I put a wide range of plans into practice. In order to strengthen my magic, I started tilling a field. I honed my skills in swordplay. And I dedicated myself to crafting increasingly realistic toy snakes. Seven years later, I finally entered the Academy of Magic, the stage for the game's story, and met the game's heroine, Maria.

Bring it on, Bad Ends! Or so I eagerly thought, but though the game produced its share of crises, it concluded with a Friendship End, and I was able to avoid each of the Bad Ends unscathed.

After moving up to the next grade, I faced several strange incidents such as kidnappings (my brother's and my own), but I solved these problems too, and was eventually able to graduate from the academy and enter employment at the Magical Ministry.

Now then, it's time to do my best as a working member of society! I

thought to fire myself up, but then there came a shocking revelation. Believe it or not, *Fortune Lover* had a sequel. Its title was *Fortune Lover II: Love at the Magical Ministry*. In this game, after graduating from the Academy, our protagonist Maria starts working at the Magical Ministry, fosters a deeper romance with the target of her previous conquest, and can even fall in love with an all new conquest.

When I first learned of this, I was worried, but after really, really thinking it over, I realized that, after the events of the original *Fortune Lover*, the villainess, Katarina Claes, would have either been killed or exiled from this kingdom.

I had entered employment at the Magical Ministry, but the Katarina of the game had not. That being the case, there was no problem. There was no chance of doom left. However, the relief I felt was fleeting, dashed by the sight in my dreams of Katarina the villainess on a game screen, wearing a hood and making her return... And what awaited her after that was, as expected, doom. This time, instead of exile outside the kingdom, I could expect a lengthy prison sentence... Just when I'd thought I'd managed to avoid every Bad End, a new series of Bad Ends emerged, and my days of avoiding them began once again.

For starters, I occupied my days practicing using the Dark Magic I had obtained by coincidence to create a smoke screen I could use when I needed to run away, and fumbling around for a method of escape I could use if I ended up imprisoned, but then I discovered that the events of *Fortune Lover II* would be over in another six months. I made up my mind, thinking, *All right, in that case I just need to hold on for another six months, and I'll have avoided a Bad End once again!*

As I was stringing these words together in my head, and looking up at the sky...

"These sweets here are also delicious. Please try one," suggested a beautiful girl with reddish brown hair and eyes.

"Thank you, Mary. I'll help myself, then," I said, popping one of the treats Mary had recommended to me into my mouth. "Yummy."

As I said this, the girl who had been running around the garden came over. She then fixed her gaze on the sweet I was holding in my hand.

"Do you want one?" I asked. After looking a bit startled, she nodded slightly.

“Here you go,” I said, taking another one and handing it to the girl, whose face broke into a smile.

The girl hesitated before saying “Thank you,” in a tiny voice, then stuffed the sweet in her mouth. The sight of her chewing with her round cheeks puffed out was adorable.

“How cute,” I said without thinking.

Mary added, “Well of course. Naturally our child would be extremely cute,” in a boastful manner. After Mary called the girl over and brushed away the crumbs stuck to her mouth, the girl grinned and ran off into the garden once again.

“Ahh, so cute.”

“Yes, she truly is.”

As we murmured these words to each other, a voice came from behind. “Hm, whose pip-squeak is that?”

Turning around at the sound of this familiar, slightly rough voice, we were greeted by the sight of the fourthborn prince, Alan, with his silver hair and blue eyes. And standing next to him was his older twin, Jeord, the thirdborn prince, who had blond hair and blue eyes.

At Alan’s question, Mary answered without hesitation: “She’s my child.”

Alan, startled, opened his eyes wide.

“Eh, you’re kidding me. When on earth did you give birth to her? Though I should ask, ‘Who on earth is the father?’”

Smiling at the extremely confused Alan, Mary giggled, and answered with a smile, “Why, she’s mine and Katarina’s child.”

“Huh... Eh... A-A child born between two women... No, I mean, since when are you and Katarina...” At this point, Alan’s mind was completely tangled up.

Watching Alan’s agitation with an indescribable look on his face, Jeord finally opened his mouth. “Alan, calm down. This is only a mean-spirited joke. That girl is the daughter of Miss Mary’s second eldest sister, and is therefore her niece.”

“Huh, niece?” replied Alan blankly.

Mary’s face fell now that Jeord had spoiled her fun, and she responded, “Oh dear, I don’t like this. So it seems that you were aware.”

I, who had figured that Mary was probably just teasing Alan and hadn’t butted in, couldn’t say anything, and only smiled ambiguously. That was right, the girl running around my family’s

garden was the child of Mary's second eldest sister, her little niece.

Right now, Mary's big sister was pregnant with her second child and couldn't move around too much. Unable to play actively with her little girl, she had entrusted her daughter to Aunt Mary's care. When I first heard this from Mary, I was shocked. That's because, up until then, I had understood that Mary wasn't on good terms with her half-sisters, who had a different mother. So Mary explained to me how she had mended her relationship with her second eldest sister.

"My second eldest sister began a romance with her now husband, whom she met during her time at the academy, and then they were wed. At the time, both my sister and her husband had been engaged to other partners, but in both cases they were able to break off their engagements amicably. What's more, they received their former betrotheds' blessings. However, her husband's parents had doted on his former fiancée from the time that she was very young, and had looked forward to their marriage and to having her join their household. They saw my big sister as having pushed the former fiancée aside, and they shunned her terribly for it."

Mary's elder sister, who had gone through all of that to get married and join her husband's household, revealed that she was forced to live with scornful remarks from her in-laws. Though she seldom brought it up in front of her husband, whenever she wasn't at work, she was subjected to a constant barrage of scorn. While living under those circumstances, she recalled what she had done to Mary. Finding herself in a similar position, she finally realized how cruelly, and foolishly, she had treated her younger sister.

Oh, what have I done? she thought to herself. She was sure that if she went to apologize to her little sister after all this time, Mary wouldn't forgive her. On the contrary, Mary might rebuke her. Thinking this, she couldn't summon the courage.

But after she gave birth to her first child, and her delighted husband left the scene, her in-laws sneered, "Neither in the color of her hair nor the color of her eyes does this baby resemble our son. We can't be sure that she is our son's child. Any child of a mother who would steal another woman's fiancé warrants suspicion, don't you think?" On hearing this, apparently Mary's sister had snapped.

Even though they had certainly got together with his former fiancée's blessing, Mary's sister had been labeled as having pushed the former fiancée aside. She had put up with it at first because her

accusers were her husband's parents, but once they had insulted the child she had risked her life to give birth to, she could no longer keep her mouth shut. Apparently she raised her voice against their abuse.

Instead of letting them speak to her as they like, she finally spoke back, and told her husband what she had put up with for all that time. Then they had the idea to contact his former fiancée, and have her tell his parents her side of the story.

That former fiancée turned out to be quite the bold lady herself, saying to the bullying in-laws, "In the first place, I never had any romantic feelings for him. As his childhood friend, I gave him my blessing when he at last found someone he loved. Learning that you were the sort of people to bully my friend's beloved wife, I now feel disillusioned." Mary's sister reported that after hearing such a declaration, her in-laws eventually revised their attitude toward her.

Her sister had actually followed Mary's example when she lost her temper in that way, remembering when Mary had become stronger herself. The truth was, back when she was a little girl, Mary could only listen to her older sisters' insults, hanging her head in silence. But she had gradually grown stronger and sturdier, and one day started to talk back, and look straight ahead with her head held high. She was thereafter a strong and commanding young lady.

Remembering how Mary had carried herself in those days, Mary's sister decided that she, too, would no longer hang her head as others spoke ill of her, and would look straight ahead instead.

Thus, after she solved the problem in her household, and her physical condition had recovered sufficiently, she made her way to meet with Mary. She then apologized deeply for everything she had done in the past.

"I am not so shameless as to expect you to forgive me. But I at least wanted to apologize. And I wanted to thank you, for it was thanks to you that I was able to change. I'm sorry for everything up until now. And thank you." So said Mary's sister, bowing her head low. Of course, Mary was not able to forgive everything at once, but ever since that turn of events, they had striven to deepen their bond, and little by little, their relationship had improved.

Eventually, they had become close enough that now Mary was able to take care of her sister's daughter when her sister's condition was not so good.

“My second eldest sister more or less obeyed my eldest sister, so even though, if forced to describe her, I would say that she was originally a quiet type, like I once was, but recently she has started to defend me, speaking up sternly against my eldest sister, who still despises me and speaks to me with scorn. I was genuinely shocked when that happened. I suppose people can change if they want to.”

Speaking on this topic, Mary’s expression turned shy, and she almost looked like a small child herself. With that series of events, Mary’s little niece, who was in her care again today, had come here to play, but I wondered why Alan, her fiancé, knew nothing about this, and why Jeord did know about it.

“I had already ascertained that much information,” said Jeord with a smile that was somehow dark. Yeah. He’s the kind of guy I really wouldn’t want as my enemy.

“But to think Mary has a little niece. Normally speaking, I guess it wouldn’t be unusual if we had nephews and nieces of our own,” Alan let slip.

Certainly, Alan and Jeord had two older brothers, who had fiancées of their own. Normally speaking, at their age, they would have already been married, and it wouldn’t be unusual if they had had children by now. The typical age of marriage in this world was young, though by the standards of my past life, I would say very young. By the standards of this world, the firstborn prince Jeffrey and his fiancée, Susanna, were quite tardy for not yet marrying.

“My elder brother Ian is a straitlaced sort, so he is probably thinking, ‘As long as elder brother Jeffrey has not yet wed Susanna...’ or something to that effect,” Jeord speculated.

Speaking of Ian, the secondborn prince, he had futilely tried to keep his distance from his fiancée, citing as his reason, “My fiancée Selena is just too adorable, and I end up feeling like I might end up touching her. Even though I know I mustn’t come in contact with her before we are married.” He had remained so distant that, as a result, his fiancée Selena had even worried that Ian disliked her. Although, that misunderstanding had since been resolved, and apparently they were lovey-dovey now. Straitlaced. He certainly did give off that impression.

“Yeah, I know what elder brother Ian is likely thinking too, but I wonder how long elder brother Jeffrey plans to carry on like that. It couldn’t be that he’s on bad terms with Miss Susanna, his fiancée,” added a puzzled looking Alan.

I had thought the same thing. I had met the two of them together many times, and they always seemed to be getting along well.

"Well, in their case, I believe there are all sorts of reasons..." Jeord was lost for words for a moment, as if he'd just thought of something. Eventually he continued. "However, putting elder brother Jeffrey's thinking to one side, those around him are growing more and more impatient."

"Right, you mean the people in elder brother Jeffrey's faction?"

Though referred to as the four Stewart brothers, chiefly speaking, it was the two eldest brothers who each had their own faction. Nominally, the two were hostile. The fact that, behind the scenes, the four brothers got along well, was known only to a few close-knit confidants, including me. No one outside this group was aware of how friendly the four princes truly were.

"Yes, Miss Susanna's father, Marquess Randall, seems to be growing especially dissatisfied, and has voiced his complaints here and there."

Hearing these words from Jeord, Alan grumbled, "Marquess Randall, that old geezer... I just hope it doesn't lead to any trouble." After speaking in that fashion, Alan's expression turned sullen.

Excuse me, I'd prefer if you didn't bring up such seemingly unpeaceful subjects in the peaceful gardens of Claes Manor. Even if Mary's little niece—waving excitedly at us from far away—can't hear you, Mary and I can.

Wisely, Mary and I had paid no attention to their conversation, but to call it a subject that had nothing to do with us really wouldn't wash. Presently, Mary and I were the fiancées of these two princes, and in this kingdom where the heir to the throne was not necessarily the eldest child, but was selected by the current ruler, our positions could not be said to be unrelated.

"There is a possibility that he might perhaps abandon elder brother Jeffrey, who is incapable of deception, and approach you or me. If that time comes, please be careful. You are, after all, simple and easily fooled."

At these words from Jeord, Alan frowned. "Why, you... How can you speak to your own little brother like that?"

"It's *because* you are my own little brother that I'm doing you the favor of telling you this," answered Jeord nonchalantly, prompting a shrug and a sigh from Alan.

I wonder if Alan thought to himself, "I can't beat him in a contest of words." Though I'm afraid that's exactly right. I can't beat Jeord either.

"Prince Alan, Prince Jeord is only worried about his precious little brother. He is simply not someone who can be honest about such things, which is why he ends up expressing himself in this way," explained Mary, looking at Alan and Jeord with the same gaze she had turned upon her little niece.

Jeord's face twitched slightly. "Lady Mary Hunt..." He started to say something, but with Mary's imperious gaze upon him, it looked like he swallowed his words.

"Prince Jeord, I will also keep a close eye on Prince Alan, who happens to be your precious little brother," Mary added with a broad smile.

"Please do," Jeord eventually responded, his cheek twitching slightly.

Alan, who had two guardians worrying over him, wore a terribly complicated expression. As I was used to receiving the same treatment from everyone else, I walked up beside him, patted him on the shoulder, and said, "Never mind them," turning a warm gaze upon him.

As soon as I did so, Alan assumed a sour expression. "Hey, what is that supposed to mean?"

"I mean never mind your guardians, however much they worry about you," I answered, my gaze growing more lukewarm.

"By guardians, do you mean Jeord and Mary?"

"Yes." *Of course that's who I meant.* I nodded enthusiastically.

"Uh...well, I mean, Jeord and Mary are certainly upstanding people. If I'm being quite generous—no, *very* generous—I suppose I can't object to you calling them my guardians. What I can't stand is you looking at me with such a pitying look on your face! A child like you, who has guardians picking up after you at every turn!" fumed Alan, raising his voice and pointing a finger squarely at me.

"Oh, you think you're so perfect?! Even I've managed to become somewhat respectable!" Though others often still needed to pick up after me, I was doing a respectable job as an employee of the Magical Ministry. I didn't *always* require support from others.

"Ah, so you yourself admit that you only 'somewhat' have it together. Compared to you, I am still more dependable."

"Grr, that's not—" It was...*perhaps* true that Alan was still *slightly* more dependable than me. As I growled at Alan, he smirked

back triumphantly.

"See, you are more childish after all," Alan sneered like a neighborhood bully as he ruffled my hair.

Grrr. I puffed up my cheeks and glared at Alan. I was aware that I made a lot of trouble for Jeord and Keith, and had come to accept that they would treat me like a child, but I couldn't put up with the same treatment from Alan. Jeord and his other brothers had always acted grown up beyond their years, but Alan used to be more childish than me, and much more of a brat! Alan continued to mercilessly ruffle my hair as I tried to think of a retort, but then his hand suddenly seemed to stop.

"Alan, you must not touch a woman's hair in such a casual fashion," spoke Jeord with a smile as he pulled Alan's hand away.

"Quite right, Prince Alan, you mustn't do that," Mary chimed in, likewise with a smile. Their tone of voice was that of a parent scolding a child, but their smiles seemed to give off a more menacing impression.

"Right," Alan belatedly managed to answer, as if overwhelmed by the dark smiles of his older brother and fiancée. The air around each of his guardians started to appear more and more similar.

"Ah, Princes Jeord and Alan, and Mary too. Just when did you barge into our home unannounced?" Keith entered the scene from behind the two wearing dark smiles. Past him, I spied the Ascart siblings. It seemed that those two had come to see me, and Keith had brought them through.

It also appeared that they were unaware that Mary, Jeord, and Alan were already here.

"It's a little rude of you to say that I 'barged in.' I received proper permission from the servants of Claes Manor," replied Jeord.

Mary gave a similar reply.

"No word of that made its way to me... I suppose you've already won our servants over," grumbled Keith wearily.

"Well, you might say that I'm *already* part of the family," countered Jeord with a smile.

"As am I," said Mary, again with a smile.

I had known Jeord, Alan, and Mary, as well as Sophia and Nicol, for over ten years, during which time they had visited my home frequently. So it really wouldn't be surprising if the servants considered them family and immediately waved them through the front door. That's just how close we all were.

“Lady Katarina, having heard that you had the day off, I’ve come to see you with a book I recommend in hand,” exclaimed Sophia, approaching me with a big smile on her face.

I wondered the same thing about Mary and Jeord, but how did *everyone* know that I had the day off? Don’t get me wrong, I was very pleased to see them, given I had this break, but I simply found myself wondering why.

“Tea pleathe.” Straight after Sophia greeted me, Mary’s little niece returned to the table. Apparently, she was thirsty. Even her lisp was adorable.

“My, what family do you belong to, young lady?” said Sophia, speaking to Mary’s niece, who, apparently only just realizing that she was now among people she didn’t know, hid behind Mary, looking embarrassed.

Whereupon Mary replied, “She’s my child,” smoothly repeating the same thing she had said to Alan. She seemed to like that joke.

“Wh— Prince Alan, when did this happen?!” Keith gasped, looking at Alan in shock. Alan and Mary were engaged, that much was true. So, inevitably, any child of Mary’s must also be Alan’s child—assuming the child was actually Mary’s, that is.

“Huh? I mean, what are you saying? Keith, you’ve got the wrong idea, I haven’t done anything,” insisted Alan, waving his hands and looking extremely flustered.

“That’s right. She is not Prince Alan’s child. She is my and Lady Katarina’s daughter.” Once again, Mary told the same joke. Though I thought that Keith wouldn’t be fooled as easily as Alan...but he froze up in just the same way.

“But, I mean, you’re both women. Could it be...?”

Keith, this is all because I desperately raised you to be unspoiled, fearing that you might become the playboy I knew from the game...meaning that you grew up without various kinds of knowledge. I’m sorry. Two women really can’t make a baby.

Next to Keith, Sophia’s head seemed to be full of odd knowledge. “Oh, so members of the same sex can finally have children? Don’t tell me there’s now medicine that can change one’s sex—” she burbled, among other such suspicious things. I thought to myself that it might be about time for me to help Sophia revise the genre of books she read. While I thought about this, I unconsciously assumed a far-off expression as I watched over my friends.

Jeord, with the same look in his eyes, blurted out to Nicol, “No matter how I look at them, the members of this lineup are just a little simpleminded, wouldn’t you say?”

“I’m sure they don’t act this way at work, but when it comes to Katarina, they do seem particularly useless. I suppose Katarina has had a strong influence on them,” agreed Nicol dispassionately.

When he said that I’d had a strong influence on my friends, did he mean it in a bad way, or a good way?

“I also think that you should really caution your sister about the kind of books she reads,” Jeord remarked, turning his gaze toward Sophia, who was speaking at length about imaginary methods by which two women could produce children. Strangely, he had arrived at the same opinion as me.

Nicol thought for a moment. “I’ll take the proper measures.”

He spoke with a distant look in his eyes. Eventually, after slogging through intense confusion, everyone understood that the little girl was Mary's niece. Around that time, a servant of Claes Manor came bearing a letter for me.

"Oh, it's from Ginger." This letter had been sent by Ginger, a junior of mine at the Academy of Magic. When I graduated, she had taken over the vegetable garden I had raised.

Written neatly on the page were the words, "The majority of the vegetables you entrusted to me have reached the time of their harvest. Would you like to harvest them together?"

I definitely wanted to take part in harvesting the vegetables from my garden at the academy! And then I'd like to enjoy eating the vegetables that we would harvest, just as I had done in the past. *Let's have a harvest festival!* I resolved, before discussing it with everyone gathered around me. Upon sharing the news everyone else was also enthusiastic. It was something we had done together back when we attended the academy.

I sent a positive response to Ginger at once, kicking off a correspondence between us, and once I had sorted out everyone else's availability, we arranged to hold a harvest festival at the Academy of Magic.

On the day of the harvest festival, we had all attempted to match our schedules together, so nearly all current and former members of the student council came together to celebrate the festival.

I had tended a field from the age of eight, so of course my adoptive brother and friends, who had been helping me ever since then, were very skilled by now, but I was shocked to see how capable Ginger and Fray, current members of the student council, had become. Ginger said that she had some experience growing vegetables at home, but Fray, a dyed-in-the-wool young noblewoman, had apparently never done garden work before I introduced her to it. However, at some point she had become brilliantly dexterous, like a veteran farmer.

Remarking on this incredible growth, I called out to Fray, saying, "You really seem used to this now."

"I would have to say I'm quite good with my hands," she

replied, chuckling.

"Well, even so, this is amazing. You're practically a pro gardener now!" I wondered how long it had taken me to reach the same level.

"A pro gardener, you say? Tee hee hee," Fray laughed, clearly amused, and then added the following: "But I must say, it really is fun working the earth like this. For one reason or another, I find myself coming here every day, so I think I've started to grow used to it."

"Wh— Fray, have you started to find farmwork fun?!" I asked, so happy to hear Fray—who, however you looked at her, was a picture-perfect noble girl—describe field work as fun, that I couldn't help but lean forward.

Fray answered, "Yes, I have. Although I started doing it casually, only thinking of helping Ginger, seeing vegetables planted by my own hand growing steadily makes me very happy, and knowing that the more I work on them, the more fruitful the harvest will be, made it all the more fascinating. Now I find myself coming here perhaps even more than Ginger does."

While I was still attending the academy, I had quite a few opportunities to socialize with Ginger and speak with her, and more often than not Fray was standing beside her, but despite that, I don't think I had many opportunities to really speak with Fray herself.

Fray seemed to be an ideal young lady, both in her looks and in her conduct, so I had a strong impression that she was only doing field work to help her good friend Ginger. Learning that she had become so obsessed with it herself, and for much the same reason that I had at that, pleased me greatly.

I gave Fray an impassioned speech, explaining that the veggies would come out different depending on the day they were harvested—on the time of day, even—so one needed to look at them carefully to determine what was best for each of the little darlings.

Some people might have no interest in this subject, and would react to one of my speeches with exasperation, but Fray listened with her eyes sparkling.

"I'm learning so much," she said, listening to my speech with her face breaking into a smile. I felt my cheeks naturally start to loosen as well. After talking to Fray today, my impression of her

had changed.

"I never thought you would listen to me talk about field work so intently. I always figured you were a prim and proper young noblewoman with no interest in such things," I revealed to Fray, my eyes widening slightly.

"I can see what you mean. I too considered myself a *thing* that you might call 'a young noblewoman.'"

"Fray?" I responded quizzically, not quite understanding what she meant.

After smiling, while somehow still looking sad, she went on, "Lady Katarina, I have wanted to thank you for some time now."

"Thank me? Did I do something for you, Fray?" I had no idea what she meant.

Fray nodded decisively. "Yes. This happened before I started at the academy. I came for a tour of the campus, and while I was walking around aimlessly, I came upon this field. Then I saw you wearing work clothes and tending the crops, Lady Katarina."

"Huh, really?" Did I meet Fray in this field before she started at the academy? Hmmm. I racked my memory to try and recall such an event, but I couldn't.

Fray giggled quietly to herself while watching me puzzle over this. "I think it was a little while before the commencement ceremony. Though I probably seemed quite different then from the way I am now. That's right. I was something like a doll, without emotions."

Like a doll without emotions? Looking at Fray as she was now, I simply couldn't imagine that. With that thought on my mind, I continued to work backward through my memories, when suddenly...

"Ah!" That's right, I think it happened around the time that our spring vacation was about to end. While I was digging rows in the earth with Anne, who had accompanied me to the academy, in order to plant potato seeds, a solitary girl appeared in the field, where people seldom came.

"Have you remembered?" asked Fray, smiling. Looking squarely at her now, I couldn't immediately imagine that she really was the girl I had met that day. That was how much her mood had changed. These days, Fray was confident, with a light in her eyes that spoke of her strong will, whereas the girl I met back then seemed to have no feelings of her own, her eyes seeming to reflect nothing at all.

“I remember now, but you were so different that it’s hard to imagine that you’re the same person,” I admitted.

“I’m happy to hear that. It’s because of you, Lady Katarina, and another person, that I was able to change,” Fray declared, before smiling, and looking up at the sky.

★★★★★★★

I, Fray Randall, had spent my entire life as a doll who could do nothing besides listen to my father, Marquess Randall. I had always been told, *It is for this purpose that you are alive*, so I simply did whatever the marquess told me to do, and never thought that there was anything strange about that.

No, I might have thought that it was strange, once upon a time, but confronted with the marquess, who would respond to any rebellious behavior with harsh words and violence, perhaps my heart had been rendered numb over time.

My mother, one of Marquess Randall’s mistresses, was always afraid of him. In the first place, Marquess Randall had obtained her from a noble house of lower status in order to secure a debt, but also because she had a certain amount of magical ability. After I was born, my mother’s health was impaired and she could no longer bear children, so she remained in the manor with the sole purpose of caring for me. She waited on me so much like a servant of the house that I sometimes doubted that she even knew that I was her daughter.

With a mother who only interacted with me as a servant, and a father who did nothing but issue commands, I was surrounded only by tutors, who drummed all manner of lessons into me. My role was to act so that the marquess’s plans would progress. Ultimately, I was to marry for Marquess Randall’s benefit. I was brought up being told that I only existed to be used for that purpose.

Even when it was almost time for me to commence my studies at the Academy of Magic, I still thought that this was something that would never change. That is, until I met that person...

This took place when I went to the Magical Ministry with Marquess Randall. The marquess, who probably wanted to use the presence of a daughter with high magical ability to curry favor with Ministry officials, became terribly irritated after finding that his

attempt to promote himself had ended in failure.

That irritation seemed to be directed toward me, his daughter. After leaving the room where we had met with the officials and walking along the corridor for a while, as soon as it was just the two of us, Marquess Randall glared at me and said, “It’s your fault they didn’t heed my request. It was your sluggishness, wasn’t it?! You worthless child!” So spoke Marquess Randall, heaping abuse on me.

As always, I bowed my head and said, “I am truly sorry.”

But on this occasion, Marquess Randall’s anger would not be assuaged so easily. His hand struck my bowed head from above. I stumbled and collapsed on the corridor floor.

“How dare you think that if you only bow your head, you will be so easily forgiven, you laggard!”

As he berated me, I braced myself, expecting the beating to continue. But curiously, a second blow did not come flying at me. Raising my head gingerly, I saw that a woman had appeared beside Marquess Randall and seized his raised arm.

She was a pretty woman with black hair and glasses. Her eyes stared coldly at the marquess.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” barked Marquess Randall, glaring at the woman.

“I should ask you the same question. Just what do you think you’re doing to this young woman, here of all places?” The woman’s voice was beautiful, but very cold. Her hand still held Marquess Randall’s arm in place.

After violently shaking his arm free from the woman’s grasp, Marquess Randall glared at her and said, “This is my daughter, and I was just in the middle of disciplining her! This is no concern of a slip of a girl like you. Now begone from my sight, at once!” Seeing the look of menace he gave the woman, I thought I might start shaking.

The woman, however, maintained a cool expression, and rejoined, “I find it curious that you would call hurling insults and committing violence ‘discipline.’ Also, I am not just some ‘slip of a girl.’ I am Larna Smith, a senior official in the Magical Ministry.”

“Larna Smith, an official of the Magical Ministry... I had heard that someone of that name had recently been promoted within the Ministry, but seeing what a young girl you are...it’s obvious that the Ministry has fallen on hard times,” spat Marquess Randall, mocking

Larna.

"You are the one who has fallen, Marquess Randall. There must be something wrong with your eyes, for you understand nothing. I am a high-ranking member of this Ministry. I am deeply acquainted with the very people you sought to curry favor with. Do you take my meaning?" sneered the woman, Larna Smith, her lips curling up in a taunting smile.

Marquess Randall, who had been so aggressive up until that point, suddenly recoiled. Perhaps he had thought that the woman was not aware of his identity.

Though he had come to visit the Magical Ministry with the intention of getting closer to its leaders, he just made a mockery of one of them, leaving him further away from his objective than when he started.

Even so, Marquess Randall's pride would surely not permit him to make an apology to a woman far younger than himself.

"Curses—I've had enough for today. You can find your own way home," he snarled, leaving me collapsed in the corridor and walking briskly away. I knew not where he was going. He would most likely either take the carriage we had ridden together to the Ministry back to Randall Manor, or go into town to vent his frustration. I would now have to return home by myself, but as there were carriages for hire available at the Ministry, that would not be a problem. As a matter of fact, I was relieved that, for now, I would not be subjected to any more violence from the ill-tempered Marquess Randall.

Still sitting with my hands pressed against the floor, I quietly let out a sigh.

"Are you all right?" called a voice to me. At the same time, someone offered me their hand. Standing before me was Larna Smith, whose eyes had lost their cold demeanor and now peered down at me, full of concern.

"Thank you very much," I answered, taking her hand and standing up. Because I had been sitting on the floor, my clothes were dirty, so I brushed the dust off of them. Larna Smith watched me the whole time. No one would have blamed her if she had left at that point, but for some reason she stayed, looking at me intently.

"Um, is something the matter?" I asked.

"Is he always like that?" she responded. It was obvious that she was referring to Marquess Randall's deeds from earlier.

I should not do anything to bring shame on my family. I should not do anything that would not benefit Marquess Randall. That is what I had been told. To follow what I had been taught, I should have said, "No, not at all."

But instead I hesitated, then told her, "Yes. He's always like that." Before I could stop myself, I had said it.

I heard Larna Smith gasp slightly. After a brief spell of silence, she simply replied, "Is that right?" Her voice somehow had a ring of sadness to it. This woman had clearly taken pity on me. As an official in the Magical Ministry, she had power, but there was nothing she could do about what went on within families.

"It's all right. I'm used to it," I added, putting on the bravest face I could for this kind passerby who had taken pity on me.

I plastered a fake smile across my face, whereupon Larna Smith's hand touched my face. To my immense surprise, she used that hand to wipe something from my cheek. Though I had not even realized it myself, tears were streaming down my face. *Why?* I did not understand the reason for these tears myself.

In spite of this, Larna Smith simply pressed a handkerchief against my cheek, and said, "Don't give up. Keep going, and keep looking forward... If you just hold on a little longer, I'm sure..." The last words she whispered were so quiet that I couldn't hear them, but the cheek she had wiped with her handkerchief somehow felt warmer, and my heart felt lighter.

After making sure that my tears had stopped flowing, Larna Smith accompanied me to the Magical Ministry's exit and arranged for a coach to take me home. I bowed my head over and over again as I thanked her.

"Think nothing of it," she said, stroking my head.

And so, with the horse-drawn coach swaying, I made my way home to Randall Manor. As expected, Marquess Randall had gone out to vent his frustration, and had still not come home. Apparently he ended up staying out long into the night, before returning home drunk and going straight to bed. The next day, he must have been hungover and feeling unable to get up, or something, because he stayed in his room all day. I felt relieved that he still seemed to be leaving the matter of the Magical Ministry alone, and would not hit me for it again.

But at the same time, another feeling was taking root in my heart, something I had never felt before. None of what I had

believed seemed to matter anymore, even though, so far, I had only been granted this life in order to act for the benefit of Marquess Randall.

Don't give up. Keep going, and keep looking forward. I ruminated over the words Larna Smith had said to me that day over and over. But time marched on without me coming any closer to understanding just what I should do.

Some time after that, Marquess Randall told me that he was going to the Academy of Magic to introduce himself, and that I was to accompany him. The Academy of Magic, which stood on the same grounds as the Magical Ministry, was also called a training ground for future workers at the Ministry. The connection between them ran very deep.

Marquess Randall, who had sought a connection with Ministry leaders, now wondered if he might be able to first become connected at the academy. Since I, his daughter, was due to be enrolled at the academy the very next year, he had come under the pretense of making introductions, with the ulterior motive of flattering the faculty.

In contrast to the cold dismissal he had received from the officials at the Magical Ministry, the people at the academy received him with a fair amount of courtesy. I was relieved to think that I would not be subjected to verbal abuse or violence.

Then Marquess Randall left me there, saying that he would be going directly to the palace, and commanded me to return home by myself. In the past, I am sure I would have gone straight home, climbing into the coach we had taken there. However, on this occasion I had thoughts of my own. I thought that, since I would soon be commencing my studies at the academy, I would like to have a proper look at the campus.

Marquess Randall had only come to greet the faculty to curry favor with them, under the pretense of bringing his daughter to see the academy, but in reality I had not been shown anything. From the day Larna Smith had spoken those fateful words, I had started to look at what lay in front of me, little by little. As I considered what lay in front of me at that moment, I thought that the academy somehow seemed like a lovely place, and that I wished to see more of it.

I decided that I would go and look around the academy of my own volition. I thought that I wouldn't mind if Marquess Randall

criticized me for it later. This was in spite of the fact that I had always feared him so much, and had grown up believing that I should always obey him. I wanted to go and look around by myself. Rebuffing even the servants who offered to accompany me, I did just that.

My heart pounded from this unprecedented act of independence, as I inspected the academy from top to bottom. Eventually, I came upon something I never would have expected to find. No matter how I looked at it, it simply didn't belong in the Academy of Magic. I could only gape at the vegetable garden filling my field of vision, dumbfounded.

"Oh, who are you?" someone called out. As I turned to look at the speaker, I saw a woman wearing farming clothes looking right at me.

"Um, I'm a newly enrolled student, starting in the next school year." Not wanting to be taken for someone suspicious and ending up in trouble, I quickly explained myself.

"Oh, then you'll be in the year below me," said the woman in work clothes, smiling. From her attire, I had been sure that she was one of the academy's gardeners, but incredibly, she actually seemed to be a student.

In that case, was she the daughter of a noble house? Well, no noblewoman would be seen tilling a field, nor would she be dressed like that. That's right, I was sure that I had heard that in the year above mine, there was a commoner who could use Light Magic. Perhaps she was that commoner?

"Um, might you be the Wielder of Light that I have heard rumors about?" I inquired.

The woman smiled, and replied, "No, but she's a friend of mine. I'm Katarina Claes. I hope we'll get along."

Katarina Claes. That was a name that I had heard before. The only daughter of the house of Duke Claes, and the fiancée of the thirdborn prince. So she was a noblewoman of higher status than me! Why would such a person be doing this?

"Um, might I ask what you're doing here?" Under normal circumstances, I would feel obliged to respond to an introduction from someone of nobler birth than me by introducing myself, but my shock and doubt won out over this feeling of obligation, so I could not help but wonder. Though I knew my attitude was not suitably respectful for a young noblewoman, Katarina Claes did not

seem bothered in the slightest.

"Sure, I was just digging rows to plant potato seeds," she replied, though I cannot say I really understood. In other words, she had been doing the sort of field work that a farmer might do. Perhaps that was all I needed to know. But why would a woman of such noble standing be working in a field? Perhaps some manner of grave misfortune had befallen her family?

"Um, why would you do such a thing?" I was surprised at the extent to which my mouth kept moving. Usually I would never speak to a new acquaintance in such a manner.

"Huh? Because it's my hobby."

This reply was so unexpected that I couldn't help but freeze up.

"Hobby...?" I murmured, simply parroting what she had said.

Katarina Claes grinned and declared, "That's right, a hobby. I'm only doing it because I want to."

She had answered me so casually that I couldn't help feeling silly for thinking that some grave misfortune had befallen her. And she seemed to glow with a sense of freedom as she declared that she was only doing field work because she wanted to.

Almost enchanted by that glow, I could not help but follow with another question: "Um, somebody told me that I shouldn't give up, but should keep looking forward. But what am I supposed to do next? Can you tell me?"

Ever since I had received those words, I had felt hazy, almost as if a curtain had been drawn around my mind. Not knowing what to do, I had wanted to talk to someone, but had no one I could ask. So I ended up asking this stranger I had only just met. I felt that this person, who glowed with a sense of overflowing freedom, would have an answer for me.

Upon hearing my question, Katarina Claes gave me a puzzled look. That wasn't surprising. Anyone would consider it an imposition to be asked such a profound question by a junior classmate they had only just met. *How insolent of me to even ask.*

"Um, please excuse me. I shouldn't have interrupted you." I was overcome by a strong sense of shame, and was about to leave when Katarina Claes opened her mouth again.

"I guess you should keep moving on."

"Huh?"

"If you've decided not to give up, and keep looking ahead, I think the next thing to do would be to move forward," explained

Katarina Claes, grinning just like she had earlier.

It took me a while to respond. “Move forward?”

“Yep. Put one foot in front of you like this and step forward,” said Katarina Claes, who put one foot forward before taking a big leap in the same direction. The sight of this woman in work clothes jumping through a garden, with the light of the sun pouring down from above, might have looked comical to an outside observer. But to me, she looked divine, almost like a sculpture of a god. I experienced a curious feeling, as if the curtain that had shrouded my mind up until now had been torn away in an instant.

Just move ahead. Put one foot forward. That was it. I had known what I wanted to do after all. I knew that life couldn’t go on this way forever. I felt as if the world had opened up to me all at once. My world, which had been gray, now had color.

Larna Smith’s words, which I hadn’t fully understood at the time, now saturated my mind. With what Larna Smith—I mean, Lady Larna Smith—had given me, followed by my encounter with Lady Katarina Claes, I was able to discard my old self, the marionette I used to be. I was able to become a new person.

My heart, which had been closed, was now open. At the same time, the fear and loyalty I had felt toward Marquess Randall, which I had been so sure were absolute, also started to fade away.

“Thank you so much.” I tried to articulate the gratitude I felt toward the person who had pulled away the heavy shroud I had placed over my own heart.

“Huh, for what?” A puzzled look came over Lady Katarina Claes’s face. How should I put it? She seemed to be a straightforward person.

“I think I would like to take a few steps forward before I start at the academy,” I admitted, putting words to my own resolve. I imagined that my words would sound incomprehensible to Lady Katarina Claes.

But once again, she smiled. “Go for it.”

“I will.” I then said a proper goodbye to Lady Katarina Claes, looked squarely ahead, and took my first step forward. Though later, once I had gotten in the horse-drawn coach that would take me home, I remembered that I had never given her my own name, and started to fret. (But in the end, the next time I met Lady Katarina, it turned out that she had forgotten the whole conversation).

From that day on, I lived not as a doll who knew only how to nod, but started to speak my own opinions as Fray Randall. I decided to voice the feelings I had kept pushed down inside my heart for all this time.

Perhaps someone had said something to him, or else it was because I was soon to enter the academy, but for his part, ever since that day that Lady Larna Smith had stopped him from hitting me, Marquess Randall no longer beat me.

However, after I suddenly became defiant toward him, he did still shout abuse at me, but I was starting to understand that verbal abuse from Marquess Randall, whom I had feared so much in the past, could simply be ignored and allowed to pass.

People can change if they try. I became almost unrecognizable compared to the person I had been a year earlier. And as a result of that change, I was able to make close friends, the likes of which I had never had before. For one, there was Ginger, who adored Lady Katarina, to whom I owed about as much thanks as I owed Lady Larna Smith. Though Ginger's social status and life experiences were very different from my own, we began to talk because of our mutual affection for Lady Katarina. That being said, Ginger was not the most forthcoming person, and would not quite admit that she was so fond of Lady Katarina.

Ginger was a serious and industrious sort, and not someone who would take part in the sort of flattery and brownnosing typical of noblewomen, so she probably would not have had much to do with me if I was still the kind of person I had been before entering the academy.

As it was, though, I found being around Ginger very comfortable. There was no need for us to question each other's true intentions, or engage in flattery. She provided a new place for me to belong.

"Fray? What's wrong?" While I had been standing there absentmindedly as I recalled one thing after another, Lady Katarina looked at me in concern.

"Ah, nothing, excuse me. A lot of memories just came back to me."

"Really? Are you okay?" Though Lady Katarina was thoroughly dense when it came to the subject of romance, she could still be surprisingly sharp when it came to people's feelings, and she must

have realized that I had recalled something disagreeable from my past.

"I'm all right. Thanks to you, Lady Katarina, I feel like I was born again, so my next goal is to be like Lady Larna Smith!" I announced resolutely.

"Hmmm. Well, Lady Larna certainly is good at her job, but..." Lady Katarina's face was troubled. As she was currently working in the same department as Lady Larna Smith, there must have been things that she knew that I did not. I envied her.

"I'll work hard so that, next year, I can be assigned to your department, Lady Katarina."

Lady Katarina blinked. "Huh, you'll be coming to work in our department? That's a little...um..." Once again, her face somehow looked troubled. I stared back at her, thinking that this was an odd reaction, when Ginger, wearing work clothes, appeared a short distance away.

"Lady Katarina. You know, I am also scheduled to start work at the Magical Ministry," she revealed, doing her best to promote herself. Well, actually, she might not have been doing so consciously.

"Really?! So Fray and Ginger are coming to join us? Then I'm really looking forward to the next year of work." Lady Katarina grinned. But then she remarked, "I'll just have to hang in there for about six more months." I could have sworn that she said this with a solemn expression, but in the blink of an eye her usual smile had returned, so perhaps it was only my imagination.

We then went on to enjoy our time together with Lady Katarina and the other former members of the student council. Incidentally, the most effective garden worker in attendance proved to be Lady Katarina's personal maid, Anne. She did roughly twice the work of any other person, but still harvested her vegetables gracefully. I guess having assisted Lady Katarina with her gardening ever since her lady was a small child, she had become more skilled than anyone else. Seeing her look at Lady Katarina with the most gentle look in her eyes, I could tell that she was very fond of her charge. I imagined that I always looked at Lady Katarina with the same look in my eyes.

Lady Katarina, I am truly glad to have met you.

Chapter 2: Everyday Life at the Magical Ministry

Having heard during the harvest how passionate Fray and Ginger were about the Magical Ministry, and having had a party afterward to thank everyone for their hard work, I boarded a horse-drawn coach and headed home.

Though I had known that Fray looked up to Larna, I was surprised to hear that she wanted to work in the same department. But I suppose that was to be expected.

The same department as Larna. In other words, the Magical Tool Laboratory, where I was currently working.

Hmmm. So that brilliant and adorable Fray will be coming to work in our department...

Larna Smith, the department chief of the Magical Tool Laboratory, was herself so brilliant that she had joined the leadership of the Magical Ministry at an unusually young age, but she also had quite a strong personality. A total nerd for magic, she had a tendency to neglect anything not strictly related to the magic which drew her attention so powerfully. Working in the same department, I had become familiar with that aspect of her personality, and I also had to do a lot more work to make up for her neglect.

Even so, when push came to shove, she was a boss who could always be relied on to protect her subordinates. Besides, Larna was not the only peculiar person in the department. There was a cross-dressing muscular macho man, someone with far too little presence and a predisposition to getting lost, an extreme narcissist who had modified his uniform to be all sparkly, someone who could only make conversation by speaking through a plush toy, someone who wore a tank top all year round, and a mad scientist type who always wore a lab coat. We also had some flawed pretty boys with tragic backstories, like the previous student council president, and a former member of a gang of kidnappers from a foreign kingdom.

How could I describe the Magical Tool Laboratory, other than as a den of oddballs? That must have been one of the reasons that it was apparently the department most new employees least wanted to join.

The department was full of strange people, but they were also all good people, so it was a great place to work, but I wondered if Fray would be able to cope with so many intense personalities.

But, well, given how talented Fray was, I had a feeling that there was a high probability of her being scooped up by the Magic and Magical Powers Research Department, where Maria worked alongside her colleague Dewey. With Cyrus at its head, the members of that department were known as the star players of the Ministry. As the department's staff were both very popular and very capable, all the promising candidates seemed to end up there.

Incidentally, both Dewey and Cyrus were romanceable characters in *Fortune Lover II*, and both of them had already fallen head over heels for Maria. In the game, they were fated to be opposed by Katarina, but under the present circumstances, I counted Dewey as a good friend who had joined the Ministry at the same time as me, and Cyrus had become my farming buddy, working with me on my secret vegetable garden—but putting all that to one side, I wondered whether or not Fray would come to our department.

Hmmm. If someone had a strong enough desire to work in a particular department, would they be able to go and work there? Never having asked anyone about that, I really didn't know. *Next time I go to work, I'll be sure to ask, for Fray's sake!*

Having seen how brightly Fray's eyes shone when she talked about the Ministry, I was looking forward to the day when she could work there successfully. I just had to see that day come with my own eyes. To that end, I had to hang in there, and avoid encountering my doom for six more months! I resolved to do just that, and clenched my fists tightly.

Without missing a beat, Keith, who was seated opposite me in the carriage, asked in a low voice, "Big sister, what are you looking so determined about? Please don't stick your nose into anything troublesome again."

My adoptive brother, who I had long considered my "good luck charm," as he performed the role of picking up after me, had grown into a sexy, handsome young man, but underneath that appearance

he was actually a total mom.

"I wasn't going to do anything like that. I was just feeling eager about working hard at my job again, starting tomorrow," I refuted Keith, pursing my lips.

After considering this for a moment, Keith grumbled, "I'm glad to hear that, if that's all it was, but seriously, *please* don't stick your nose into anything weird again. Especially right now. We already have our share of difficulties."

"Difficulties?"

"Yeah. I will elaborate, since father told me that I ought to mention this to you. The truth is that recently, some families have persisted in asking the following question of the house of Duke Claes: 'Your daughter's engagement to Prince Jeord has continued for some time now, but does she actually intend to marry him at some point?' It has been something of a nuisance to deal with them."

"Are you talking about relatives of the Claes family?" I had already heard father mention that our relatives had been asking that same question.

"No, if it was only our relatives, then it wouldn't be too much of a problem, but this time we've been scrutinized by quite a powerful family."

"A powerful family?"

"The house of Marquess Randall."

"Hm, Marquess Randall, you say? Isn't that Lady Susanna's family?"

"I suppose it is."

"Then what could they possibly hope to achieve by asking about *my* marriage? Surely the marriage of Lady Susanna and Prince Jeffrey should come first?"

Jeffrey, the firstborn prince, and Susanna, his fiancée, had been engaged for longer than Jeord and I, and would soon be past what was considered marriageable age. However one looked at it, surely it was more important for them to hurry up.

"You're absolutely right, but there are rumors saying that Lady Susanna and Marquess Randall are not on very good terms."

"Huh, really?!"

"Yeah. Although the Randall family has nominally claimed the position of leading supporters of Prince Jeffrey, in reality their relationship doesn't appear very strong. And although the Randall

family denies it, I have even heard that Lady Susanna no longer lives as part of the household, but has rented a place of residence somewhere else."

"I-Is that right?" I had not expected to hear that Lady Susanna, who always seemed so cheerful, did not get along with her family.

"Given these circumstances, Marquess Randall can't push too hard when it comes to Prince Jeffrey and Lady Susanna. So two people who should have been married long ago are still only engaged, and the question of royal succession is still undecided. I'm sure the marquess has a lot to worry about. We think that's why he's come to sound us out, but in any case, Marquess Randall is someone with a strong desire for power, so we don't know what he might attempt if he becomes impatient. I don't tend to think that he'll try doing anything to you personally, big sister, but I want you to be more careful about what's going on around you."

I had to ponder this for a moment. "I see. Understood." I thought things were already bad enough, at a time when a Bad End from *Fortune Lover II* might be in my future, and I felt quite despondent at having to worry about some unknown nobleman on top of that. The thought of how gloomy Lady Susanna's family history was didn't help.

Seeing how depressed I looked, Keith spoke up again. "When we get home, there are some sweets I prepared for you. I'll make some tea too, so let's eat them together."

Keith really knew how to handle me. I suppose eating tasty sweets was usually enough to cheer me up. And so it was that, almost as if I was dancing in the palm of Keith's hand, sweets were all it took to put me back in high spirits. Given that pleasant feeling, combined with the fatigue from our lively work at the harvest festival, I slept soundly that night.

Returning to the Magical Ministry at the end of my vacation, I found it was business as usual. As always, I headed to the Magical Tool Laboratory. There I was sure I'd find Sora preparing the office for the day's work, all by himself. Sora was my colleague who had joined the Ministry around the same time as me, and he always arrived at the office a little earlier than me.

"Good morning," I said as I opened the door.

"Morning." Sora did indeed return my greeting, but standing next to him was a man I did not recognize. What's more, the man

had a rough air about him. His deep set eyes under still eyebrows, and muscular body made me sure that a certain type of lady would squeal at the sight of him.

Hmm. As I was wondering just which department this man belonged to, he spoke up.

"Oh my, good mor-ning!" the man exclaimed, waving to me. Both this gesture and this voice were very familiar to me.

"L-Laura?" I sputtered, opening my eyes wide.

"Cor-rect!" she said, holding up two fingers in a cute peace sign. The gesture clashed strongly with her present appearance. This was my senior colleague from this very department, who was officially named "Guy Handerson," but who called herself "Laura." No doubt about it.

"Wh-Why are you dressed like that?! What happened to your regular clothes and makeup?!" When I thought of Laura, I imagined someone with a macho, masculine body, but wearing cute, frilly women's clothes, and with such perfectly applied makeup that one could only guess as to what her face might look like without it.

You're telling me she's only cool and macho now?! What's going on?!

"Because of something work-related, I have to wear a disguise. I'm following Lady Larna's example."

"A disguise? You mean what you're wearing now?" If I had to pick one or the other, I would say her normal appearance seemed more like a disguise. To be completely honest, this look felt like a much better fit.

"That's right. I look like someone who might be doing hard physical labor in the neighborhood, don't I?"

"Yes. That's exactly how you look. More to the point, is that how you look without makeup?" Never having seen her without makeup before, I didn't know how she looked without it.

"Oh, not a chance. A lady does not reveal her unmade face so easily. Tee hee hee," Laura laughed pointedly.

"You're a lady then, are you?" Sora quickly blurted out, after a glance at Laura.

"Oh, I'm a lady however you look at me, am I not?"

Laura, who from every angle appeared to be a macho man heading home from a morning of physical labor, did a twirl. Her typical appearance was one thing, but with her current appearance, however I looked at her, she did *not* look like a lady. Sora and I

could only smile ambiguously.

"Erm, getting back on topic, are you going to be working in that getup today?" I asked Laura.

"That's right. Once my partner is finished preparing, we'll be heading out," she answered with a smile.

"By your partner, do you mean Mr. Hart?" The brawny Laura was often seen together with Nathan Hart, who was best characterized as lanky, so I thought that might be the case this time.

"No... Where we're going today, I can't really be seen dragging a young man around on a leash, so Nathan will be staying here," Laura replied firmly in the negative.

A leash... True, though Nathan Hart was talented, he had a terrible tendency to get lost, even still having trouble finding his way around the Magical Ministry. When he went outside the office for work, he had to be accompanied by a partner who would hold a leash harnessed to him. *Hmmm.* Considering that Laura was also in disguise, there must be some special circumstances around today's work site.

"Ah... To think that someone as beautiful as me must wear such plain attire... Truly, this is uncomfortable." The door slammed open, and a man entered the office speaking these words. His appearance mirrored Laura's disguise—a young man dressed for physical labor. Though of course, he was less brawny than Laura.

"Ummm... Are you Mr. Cornish?" Neither his face nor his clothes had many distinguishing features, but his voice was unmistakably that of Nix Cornish.

"Yeah, you are correct, newbie. As expected, even in this plain attire, my aura of beauty cannot be extinguished," he declared while embracing himself tightly.

This really was the Mr. Cornish I was used to. He was a severe narcissist, and very much in love with his own beauty. His clothes were normally very flashy, and he clearly devoted a lot of time to his skincare and makeup, spending any spare moment he might find in front of a mirror. To think that he was now in plain clothes, with a plain face. Though I also felt the same way about Laura's current appearance, seeing Mr. Cornish like this was really a rare treat.

"So by 'partner,' you meant Mr. Cornish," deduced Sora.

Sighing slightly, Laura confirmed, "Yes, I did. He might not get lost, but it looks like keeping his annoying mouth shut will be hard

work."

After that, Mr. Cornish spouted a number of things, including, "It's an act of sacrilege upon this world for me to be dressed like this!" but Laura simply dragged him with her as they headed out to work.

Because Mr. Cornish had carried on for so long, by the time they had left, several of my other more senior colleagues had already arrived. Among them was Lisa Norman, said to be a childhood friend of Mr. Cornish, who watched him leave with a cold look in her eyes.

"I only hope that empty-headed man doesn't cause any problems, like he always does." The adorable hand puppet Miss Norman was holding spoke ill of Mr. Cornish in a deep voice. These were Miss Norman's words, of course. Incidentally, though today Mr. Cornish had been paired with Laura, usually he worked together with Miss Norman.

"Erm, is it the case that Mr. Cornish is always causing some kind of problem?" I asked without thinking, prompted by the negative aura hanging over Miss Norman. Both she and her puppet drew much closer to me.

"Yes, and I've had quite enough of him! He's always been that way, ever since we were children. He's always been an idiot as well. He does at least have a pretty face, but he is desperately lacking in the brains department. Catastrophically so. Back at the academy, I always had to assist him with his studies. At least he managed to graduate in the end." The hand puppet, I mean, Miss Norman, said all of this without taking a breath. The force behind her words made it abundantly clear how much difficulty she had suffered. But as usual, the expression on her face changed very little.

"Erm, just how long have you two known each other?" I had heard that they had known each other for quite a long time. Miss Norman's brow furrowed when I asked this question. Finally, her expression changed.

Miss Norman hesitated before replying. "We've been around each other longer than I can remember. Our mothers, who are related, were always close, and became closer still once they had children of the same age. After that, they would spend nearly every day together in each other's homes, taking their children with them." As she spoke through her hand puppet, she had a somewhat far-off look in her eyes. It was my first time seeing Miss Norman,

who always seemed emotionless and indifferent, become so expressive.

But I have to say that I felt a certain kind of respect for her, managing to continue speaking through her puppet without moving her mouth, even under such circumstances.

“I’m amazed that you’ve known each other ever since you were little. Did Mr. Cornish’s strong love of himself also begin when you were little?” I asked this question of Miss Norman casually, but she looked startled and stumbled over her words.

“E-Erm… I’m pretty sure…” she stammered.

Realizing that I had asked a question I shouldn’t have, I became flustered, and thought I would say, “Actually, never mind,” but before I could, Miss Norman looked directly at me and continued.

“He only became that way after this happened to me,” she said, pulling down the collar of her turtleneck slightly. Miss Norman always wore a turtleneck under her Ministry uniform. Although I had been dimly aware of the fact, the majority of the workers in this department would wear anything but their uniforms, be it a Gothic Lolita dress, a tank top, or a lab coat. They flouted the dress code so freely that I had never paid much attention to Miss Norman’s outfit before now…

With the collar of her turtleneck lowered, I could see that Miss Norman wore something like a narrow choker around her neck. Underneath that was a large scar. I gasped in shock.

In her usual dispassionate voice, Miss Norman’s hand puppet said, “I ended up this way in an accident when I was small. From that day on, I was unable to speak unassisted. After a while, this magical tool was created for me, producing a voice for me from the vibrations in my throat.” After saying this, the hand puppet indicated itself.

“That little cutie was a magical tool the whole time?!” I was shocked. I had been entirely convinced that it was a mere hand puppet, and that she had made it talk through ventriloquism.

Miss Norman smiled slightly, and said, “Surprising, isn’t it?”

“Yes. So that puppet is constructed so that a voice comes out when you flap its mouth, is it?” I looked at the hand puppet Miss Norman held with renewed scrutiny. Was it really a magical tool? No matter how I looked at it, it appeared to be a mere hand puppet. But in the past, I had thought that the bear Larna had made to look for missing people seemed to be nothing more than a plush toy.

Could this be the same sort of thing?

"The voice will emerge regardless of whether or not I flap its mouth. This device around my neck reads the vibrations in my throat and produces the sound, so I just flap its mouth to match my speech. It's cuter that way."

"Huh, is that right?"

Is it really cuter to make its mouth flap? Well, I suppose if one wanted to act like it was talking, that would maybe be better? I-I just wasn't sure.

"This little cutie was given to me by that idiot Nix back when I was still moping around after losing my voice, so I had it made into a magical tool that could speak for me." I was used to seeing Miss Norman look at Mr. Cornish coldly, but at this moment, while speaking about him, her expression was really gentle and full of fondness. "And so I was able to speak again through this little cutie, but the fact that my voice came out of a puppet resulted in me getting odd looks from the people around me. Of course that meant I didn't much feel like going outside. One day, Nix suddenly came to me dressed in those sparkly clothes he always wears."

As if recalling that moment, Miss Norman smiled slightly. "He said, 'You will serve as a foil for me, the coolest guy in the world. Now, come with me.' He dragged me out of my room, and we went straight into town. As you might expect, Nix then spoke loudly of his own beauty, leaving everyone in town speechless. He was branded as a weirdo of the highest order... And people started to tell me that, compared to Nix, that abnormal narcissist, the fact that I spoke through a hand puppet wasn't such a big deal."

Having heard all this, dim as I was, I understood. *Mr. Cornish became that way...*

"Mr. Cornish became that way for your sake, didn't he, Miss Norman?" I murmured. Apparently this was correct. The corners of Miss Norman's mouth turned up slightly, and she nodded.

"I suppose he did. It was an idiotic strategy that an idiot racked his brains to come up with. His plan was to become so weird that all the people staring at me would stare at him instead. Well, his plan succeeded."

Yep. This tale of love, of someone I had thought was just a weirdo actually doing it all out of kindness, slowly started to make sense to me. However...

"But he is an idiot, so once he started acting that way, it looks

like he really did become a narcissist. Nowadays, he's just an oddball."

Noooooo, just when the story was getting good, you had to ruin it with that final line.

"Though the truth is, unlike in the old days, this magical tool has since been miniaturized. It can be made much smaller than this puppet, and if placed around my neck in the same place this choker is now, it could make me look like I was really speaking by myself," revealed Miss Norman, touching the scar around her neck. "But this little cutie was a precious gift from that idiot, and I've used it for so many years that I've grown attached to it, so I haven't replaced it."

She then continued, in a quiet voice, "Besides, he ended up that way because of me. I can't bring myself to escape oddball status and leave him all alone like that." She smiled. It was a very gentle smile. Finally, while pressing her index finger against her lips, Miss Norman requested, "Please keep what I just said a secret from that idiot."

Such were the unseen circumstances between these two senior colleagues, who had not appeared close at all from the outside. Though I had only ever thought of my colleagues in the Magical Tool Laboratory as a gathering of oddballs, perhaps everyone there was dealing with their own various problems. That was the thought that crossed my mind.

Finally it was time for the day's work to start, and everyone got to it. Today I was scheduled to help a bit with delivering mail before having my Dark Magic practice, followed by my work decoding the Dark Covenant. The truth was that I had been told that I didn't need to go out of my way to help with deliveries, but I argued that if I just sat in a chair every day, my body would grow weak, so I was allowed to take part.

In today's Magical Tool Laboratory, Sora and Mr. Tank Top had been put in charge of transporting deliveries. Mr. Tank Top always wore a tank top, on cold days and on hot days alike. Incidentally, I had never seen him wear his actual uniform. As a result, people visiting from other departments often mistook him for a carpenter or a gardener.

"All right! Let's work hard again today!" cried Mr. Tank Top, pumping his fist in the air.

As I watched him out of the corner of my eye, I decided to try asking Sora the question that had been on my mind. "Um, Sora, do

you know if there's some deep reason why Mr. Tank Top always wears a tank top?"

"Ah, asking because you were just speaking with Miss Norman?"

It seemed that Sora had immediately discerned why I had asked such a question. Moreover, judging from how he said it...

"Huh? Sora, did you know?" I asked, shocked.

"Yeah. Though Miss Norman does hide her scar, she hasn't really hidden the circumstances surrounding it. Probably just about everyone perceptive in the department already knows," Sora answered smoothly.

"Is that so?" Not being particularly perceptive myself, *I* hadn't known.

"Still, I don't think she's spoken about it in detail to many people before. She must trust you with such things."

"Huh, really? I mean, she trusts me?"

"Yeah, I think probably most of the people in our department trust you."

"Really?!"

"Yeah, since your personality is so straightforward, even to a fault."

"Are you praising me, or insulting me?"

"Well, who can say?" Sora replied with a grin. This was his usual joke. While I was trying to come up with a retort, we heard another voice.

"Hey there, newbies! I'm about to load the cargo!" Mr. Tank Top called out to us, and our conversation ended. While grunting from the exertion, we loaded box after box onto the magical tool we used to carry goods. Today, as usual, there were a lot of deliveries to be made to each department in the Ministry.

Once the packages had all been loaded, Sora operated the magical tool. I wasn't especially good at driving the tool we used to transport goods, but Sora, dexterous as he was, operated it incredibly well. Incidentally, for some reason, there were a number of boxes that Mr. Tank Top had not loaded onto the tool, and was instead carrying by hand.

"Aren't you going to load those?" I asked.

"Carrying them this way will help train my muscles, so I don't mind," he replied, very much in character.

Looks like Mr. Tank Top doesn't have any worries. Well, but Mr.

Cornish and Miss Norman, who I thought were nothing but oddballs, did have their own profound circumstances. There might be some profound reason why Mr. Tank Top can't wear anything other than a tank top. If that was in fact the case, it would be rude to keep calling him Mr. Tank Top. I decided to ask Mr. Tank Top himself, who was grunting while carrying his boxes at shoulder height.

"Um, is there some kind of reason why you're always wearing a tank top?" I asked this with the intention of immediately aborting my inquiry if his attitude told me not to ask any more questions.

However, Mr. Tank Top casually answered, "Yeah, there's a really good reason."

"Wha— So there is one after all!" *To think that even Mr. Tank Top's tank top has a profound reason behind it... You really can't understand a person if you hardly interact with them.* I reflected on my past behavior, and privately resolved that I would try not to call him by that nickname in the future, but then he told me what his reason was.

"Yes. I wear this tank top so I'm always able to see my muscles."

"Uh-wha?" I couldn't stop a strange sound escaping my lips. Far from being unexpected, this was *exactly* the reason I had expected.

"If I put clothes on, I wouldn't be able to see my magnificent muscles, would I? If that happened, I'd lose my motivation to keep on training. Therefore I wear this tank top so I can check out my muscles at any given moment." Mr. Tank Top thrust out his chest as he stated this, seeming pleased with himself.

I thought to myself that the nickname "Mr. Tank Top" would be good enough from now on, after all.

"You can't see the muscles in your legs with those pants on. Are you fine with that?"

Hang on, Sora, what do you think you're doing asking such a pointless question, with that faint smile on your face?

"Well, in the early days I did wear short pants, which left my thighs clearly visible, but my boss at the time told me off, saying that an outfit like that wasn't appropriate in the workplace, so I had no choice but to wear full-length pants instead."

Short pants that left the thighs visible. In my past life, it was mainly girls who had worn those. We called them "shorts." Incidentally, I had not yet seen anyone wear them in this life.

A tank top on top and short pants on the bottom... Of course you

would get told off for that—though, come to think of it, he is still allowed to wear a tank top.

"At first, I refused, but my boss was dead set on persuading me, and in the end, I was told to make a choice—either my top or my pants would have to change. That was a tough choice. For three days I couldn't sleep at night, agonizing over the decision. But in the end, considering that I would usually be more likely to look at my arms, I tearfully chose to wear pants." Mr. Tank Top recounted all this wistfully, as if it was supposed to be a touching story.

Wait, wait, what are you talking about? The only thing I could conclude from this story is that things were much harder for his boss. That being said, if he hadn't chosen to keep what he wore on top back then, but instead what he wore down below, then he would have ended up becoming Mr. Shorts... Wearing skin-tight shorts over muscly legs, and showing them off every day, saying, "What do you think? Nice muscles, right?"

Yes, it really is a relief that he chose his tank top.

"So now I have no choice but to hide my legs, but when I'm at home I always take my pants off to train, so I have strong muscles there too. Want to take a look?" asked Mr. Tank Top with a smile, his hands moving to the waistband of his pants.

"I'm fine, thank you!" I declined, interrupting him somewhat. *What are you thinking, sir, pulling your pants down in the middle of a corridor at the Magical Ministry?!*

"I see. If you ever feel like looking at them, just let me know. Ha ha ha." With that utterance, Mr. Tank Top lifted the boxes he was carrying even higher. I suppose he wanted to put more of a strain on his muscles.

As I watched Mr. Tank Top walk away, I blurted out, "I guess not everyone has such a profound reason for their quirks."

Sora overheard me and responded with a grin, "What do you mean? He was faced with a profound dilemma—whether to lose his tank top or his shorts—wasn't he?"

Judging from the grin on Sora's face, he was pleased with the success of some mischief on his part.

"Could it be that you were aware of Mr. Tank Top's circumstances this whole time, Sora?" I ventured to ask.

"Yeah, I had a vague idea. I mean, he's always posing in front of the mirror in our dormitory. And if you're really unlucky, he'll grab hold of you and brag about his muscles, so I figured that he

probably just liked his body and wanted to show it off," Sora replied smoothly.

"Huh... Then there was no need for me to ask him, was there? You left me to ask an unnecessary question, and listen to details about his past that I did not want to know about, like the fact that he used to wear short pants."

Sora smiled wryly before responding to my complaint. "Not really. Even I didn't know about the short pants."

Mr. Tank Top used to wear shorts with his tank top. Out of everything I've learned recently, that has to be the most pointless piece of information.

"Even so, you know a lot about our more senior colleagues, don't you? Is that simply because you joined the Ministry just a bit earlier than me?"

"No, that alone wouldn't make such a big difference. There's the fact that you're simply kind of dim, but there's also the fact that I live in the Magical Ministry's dormitory, so I guess it's easier for me to learn about our senior colleagues who also live there."

"I see, so you live in the Ministry dormitory. Do all of our seniors live there as well?" As I commuted to work from home by horse-drawn carriage, I didn't know much about the dormitory.

"Well, many do. As it's on Ministry grounds, living there makes it easy to get to work, though I hear that there are also quite a few workers who rent homes near the castle. Workers like you, who commute from their manor homes, are in the minority."

"Is that so?" *I suppose living closer to the Ministry would make it easier to commute to work. I do admire people who work and live by themselves—but my family is pretty overprotective, so they probably won't let me do that.*

"By the way, who else lives in the dormitory building?"

"It's a big building, so it's not as if I can keep track of everyone who lives there, but from our department there's Mr. Wolt, Mr. Cornish, and Miss Norman."

"Oh...?"

Apparently, Mr. Tank Top and Mr. Lab Coat lived there too. There were quite a lot of our senior colleagues living there, surprisingly. According to Sora, the dormitory also provided meals, so life there was extremely convenient.

"Dormitory life sounds kind of lovely."

"Yeah, though since the building is on Ministry grounds, if

you're not careful, you may get called in to work whenever they're shorthanded. That part is kind of a pain. Also, because of how many people live there, there are a lot of rooms, so the floor plan is pretty complicated. So I think it would be pretty difficult for someone like Mr. Hart to live there."

"Ah, you mean he'd get lost?"

"Yeah. For that reason, I'm pretty sure he rents a house by the nearest road into town, so he can walk to the Ministry in a straight line."

"Wha— A place in town... Can he really make it home by himself?" Mr. Hart was known for his extremely poor sense of direction. It was said that, if he was left to walk by himself for just three seconds, he would get lost. On top of that, he had quite a subdued presence, so it was very difficult to find him when he did go missing.

"Apparently, the Magical Tool Laboratory developed a tool to help him make his way to and from work."

"Wow, there are tools as useful as that? Wait, what? But in that case, Mr. Hart should never get lost, should he?"

"Well, no. It sounds like it really only allows him to travel between his home and his office here, and it's not as if it does anything amazing, like teleport him through space. Apparently all the tool does is project something like a string that only the user can see."

"Ah, so that's how it works." To be honest, I had imagined that it would be something closer to the door-like secret device used by a certain robot I remembered from my past life, and I was a little disappointed. And the thought of Mr. Hart desperately following a string in order to get to and from work left me feeling a little bit sad.

"Ah, that's right, Laura doesn't live in the dormitory building either, does she?"

"I guess not. Since she doesn't live there, I suppose she either rents a house in town, or commutes from her family home."

"Hmm? You don't know which?"

"Well, despite her manner, she's actually surprisingly secretive. We can't ever see her without makeup, after all."

"Ah— That's right! Oh, I guess I really don't know anything about Laura herself..." Laura was a bright and interesting person, so when we did meet, we always had a lot to talk about, and I had felt

like I understood her true character, but now that I really thought about it, it had all been girl talk about cosmetics, clothes, or whatever sweet shop was in vogue at the time. I had never heard Laura talk about herself. There was only one thing I had heard about her.

"Speaking of Laura, I heard that she possesses strong magical ability, but that she entered the Ministry via the general examination. I wonder if there's some reason for that."

Anyone born with magical aptitude in Sorcié would be enrolled at the Academy of Magic as soon as they turned fifteen. If they then achieved high marks, or displayed strong magical ability, they would typically be recommended to join the Ministry. The general examination was taken by talented individuals who had not been enrolled in the academy. Anyone who passed would be offered employment at the Magical Ministry.

In short, if you were not very clever, you would not pass that test. Dewey and Mr. Hart were just that clever, so they were able to join the Ministry despite coming from non-magical families.

But Laura did have magical aptitude. And it was supposed to be particularly strong at that. People with weak magic did occasionally emerge from outside of Sorcié (Sora was one such person), but it was accepted that people with strong magic never appeared outside of Sorcié.

Considering all this, as Laura was from Sorcié and had attended the Academy of Magic, I would have expected her to have joined the Ministry by recommendation. There was surely no need for her to go to the trouble of taking such a difficult exam.

"I guess you're right," Sora replied. "She must have her own circumstances as well. But she gives me the impression that she really doesn't want anyone sticking their nose into her business."

"Oh, is that so?"

"You might not realize this yourself, but you're quite good at skirting around subjects like where people come from, or their family circumstances. So good, in fact, that you might not be able to tell how they feel about those subjects."

"Can you tell, Sora?"

"Yeah. Because of my previous line of work, gathering such information is still a habit of mine. I overhear all sorts of things, and make observations."

Now that he mentioned it, I recalled that, before coming to

work here, Sora had traveled to all kinds of places, and had even handled some dangerous jobs.

"Sora, you're amazing. I feel like I wouldn't be able to hide anything from you."

"I mean, whatever you're thinking is usually clearly written on your face, so I don't think I'm the only person you'd have trouble hiding things from."

"Huh, is it that obvious?" Without thinking, I placed both hands on my cheeks.

"Plain as day."

You're kidding. As obvious as that?! During our conversation, we arrived at the first place where we needed to make a delivery.

"Right, let's get to it, newbies," Mr. Tank Top spoke up cheerfully, and took the initiative by picking up the heaviest item we were carrying. In the past I had thought he was being kind when he did that, but having heard him talk about his muscles earlier, now I understood that he just wanted to get some weight training out of this job. Perhaps that was also the reason that he tended to volunteer to deliver the mail in the first place.

Because we had three people working on delivering goods, we finished quite quickly. Mr. Tank Top looked ready to throw himself into the next job involving physical labor. When I asked Mr. Tank Top whether he had joined the Ministry by recommendation or by taking the examination, as expected, he told me it had been by recommendation. His magic was strong, but apparently his grades had been so-so. That was pretty much what I had assumed.

Leaving behind the thoroughly predictable Mr. Tank Top, Sora and I headed back to the Magical Tool Laboratory to resume our own individual tasks. Incidentally, I had my regular training in Dark Magic from my tutor, Raphael.

When we got back to the department, we found Larna briskly issuing instructions. We had seldom seen her like that in the past, as Raphael, her right hand in this department, filled in for her. But since he had been roped into tutoring me in Dark Magic, she had recently started to do her job properly. *Though I do think that she should have been doing her job properly* before *this change in circumstances.*

Raphael was nowhere to be seen in the department. I was told that he had already left to prepare the room we had borrowed to conduct my Dark Magic training, so I decided to make my own

preparations and head there myself. As soon as I was ready, I thought, *Well, time to get going*, and was about to open the door leading out of the department, when a voice called out to me.

"Wait a minute, it looks like Nathan needs to go to another department, so take him with you," said another of my senior colleagues.

Although Nathan Hart was talented, he had a hopelessly poor sense of direction and would immediately get lost even within the Magical Ministry, so when he left our department, he was usually accompanied by another person. Though apparently if his destination was nearby, he could just barely manage to get there by himself.

The department Mr. Hart was headed to just happened to be on the way to where I was going, so I left the Magical Tool Laboratory with him.

"Sorry about this. I place myself in your care," Mr. Hart apologized, and bowed his head.

"No, no, it's on the way to where I'm going, so please don't worry about it." Come to think of it, this might have actually been my first time walking alongside Mr. Hart like this. Now that I had the opportunity to look at him closely, I realized that he was actually fairly tall. That must have been why he appeared lanky, even though he wasn't especially thin.

Because of his bangs and the thick lenses in his glasses, I couldn't really see his face. I suppose this meant that I had never seen Laura's or Nathan's face au naturel. However, as they often worked as a pair, perhaps they had seen each other's unadorned faces.

"Um, Mr. Hart, have you ever seen Laura without her makeup?"

"Guy, you mean?" *This was Laura's official name.* "Come to think of it, I never have. At any rate, he seems loath to take off his makeup. So much so that even when we're out on a mission, he'll set up a partition in the room we share, saying that he can't bear to be seen without makeup."

Miss Laura, how much of a "young maiden" are you, refusing to be seen without makeup on? Though if it really was such a girly reason as that, I guess it's not like she's really hiding her true face. At least, no more so than Mr. Hart.

"Um, Mr. Hart, you're not reluctant to show people your own face, are you?" I inquired, since we were already on that topic.

“Not really. If I don’t wear these glasses, I can barely see anything, so I always have them on. If I take them off—” He casually removed his glasses, giving me a brief look of his unadorned face. He had a shocking lack of distinguishing facial features. How could I put it? He had the sort of face one would soon forget.

“Um, er…” I wondered whether or not I should tell him my honest impression.

“No distinguishing features, right? I’m still more likely to be remembered if I wear my glasses,” Mr. Hart remarked, a wry smile on his face.

Yes. That really is the case.

“Though I must ask, why are you interested in people’s faces all of a sudden?”

“Ummm, well, earlier, Miss Norman told me how Mr. Cornish ended up the way he is, so I wondered if the other senior colleagues in the department had their own stories.”

Sora had said that Miss Norman hadn’t really hidden the truth about her throat or Mr. Cornish, so I shared what she had said with Mr. Hart.

“I see, so Lisa told you, did she?” Mr. Hart smiled gently, as if he had already known all about the circumstances surrounding those two. “Nix may talk and act that way, but he’s actually very kind. Lisa is very important to him.”

“That makes sense. I was completely taken in by the way he talks and acts.”

“Ha ha ha, that’s understandable,” said Mr. Hart with a jolly laugh. “But even that act is only something he does in order to stay close to Lisa.”

“Huh, but Miss Norman said that Mr. Cornish has long since forgotten about all that, and is now just a narcissist.”

“Yeah, he can certainly seem that way, but though Mr. Cornish may have been a poor student, he’s actually quite sharp, so I think even now his act is all carefully considered.”

“R-Really?” Today, my image of Mr Cornish as a narcissistic oddball had changed all of a sudden. “You pay close attention to people, don’t you, Mr. Hart?” Since he had such a terrible sense of direction and was so prone to getting lost, I had imagined that life was already difficult enough for him, and he wouldn’t have had any attention to spare for other people.

“Hmm, I suppose I do. I spend most of my time working within the department, so over time I’ve somehow managed to acquire a general understanding of my colleagues there.”

“Is that right?” In an effort to avoid getting lost, Mr. Hart did spend most of his time in the department. Now that he mentioned it, it did make sense. “In that case, do you understand me as well?” I asked, to test him.

Mr Hart placed a finger on his chin as he considered this. “Let me see. It seems like you’re not very enthusiastic about your upcoming Dark Magic training.”

Unable to help myself, I opened my eyes wide. That was exactly how I was feeling at that moment. “You are correct. How did you know? Is my face really that easy to read?” I asked, burying my face in my hands as I thought about what Sora had said to me earlier.

“Ha ha ha, though I couldn’t tell from your expression alone, you just seemed to have a slightly gloomy air about you. That’s how you generally come off when you have Dark Magic training, Miss Claes,” Mr. Hart replied.

After hearing that my lack of enthusiasm had been noticed not just today, but every time I had Dark Magic training, I felt a mix of emotions that was hard to describe. “Well, I know that for the future of the Magical Ministry, it’s very important for me to practice Dark Magic. But I can’t help being frightened by it.”

It wasn’t as if all of my senior colleagues knew about my relationship with Dark Magic. Besides Laura and Mr. Hart, who had witnessed me using it while training, and Raphael and Sora, who were themselves Dark Magic users, there was just Larna, our department chief. None of my other senior colleagues knew about it. They had been told that Raphael and I were just practicing normal magic. Because of these circumstances, there were only a few people I could talk to about Dark Magic. So I thoughtlessly aired my complaints to Mr. Hart.

“It frightens you?”

“Yes. After all, isn’t Dark Magic an evil, terrifying form of magic used to control people’s minds? I worry that if I practice it, and become able to use it, then I’ll become evil myself.” It wasn’t as if anyone else knew this, but I was originally meant to be the villainess of this world. Blessed with the restoration of memories from my past life, and the positive influence of people around me, I had managed to lead a normal life without becoming a villainess.

But I sometimes thought that, if I continued to practice Dark Magic, I would fall into darkness myself, and become a villainess after all. Each time that thought crossed my mind, it came with an indescribable feeling of unease.

"Is that what you think, Miss Claes? That Dark Magic is an evil, terrifying form of magic?" asked Mr Hart, looking me squarely in the eye. Though I couldn't clearly see his eyes through his thick glasses, I could somehow sense that he was looking straight at me.

"Yes. I mean, isn't it evil to control people's minds?"

Mr. Hart took a moment to think about this, before answering, "That is one way of thinking about it. But it's not the only point of view."

"There's another point of view?"

"Yes. For example, suppose there was someone suffering through life with painful memories. If you were to use Dark Magic to erase those memories, that person would no longer have to suffer. In that situation, Dark Magic would be a good form of magic, would it not?"

I gaped at him. "You're absolutely right. I'd never thought about it that way before." Certainly, if one used Dark Magic in the way Mr. Hart had described, then it would be a good form of magic.

"There are all kinds of things in this world. People view the world from the perspective they prefer. But that is only one perspective. There are always other sides to the story."

"Other sides..."

"You view Dark Magic as evil, Miss Claes, do you not? In that case, was the person responsible for creating Dark Magic evil as well?"

"That's what I've always thought. I mean, whoever it was obtained the power to control people's minds by taking someone else's life. But you're saying that perhaps there was another side to that person's story as well?"

Mr Hart smiled slightly. "Yes, perhaps. Perhaps they only wanted to protect something—or someone—precious to them. There is no one alive today who knows what happened."

"That's true."

There were many sides to every story. Whatever one saw was only part of that. It would be fair to say that was obvious, but I still felt like my eyes had been opened to a new way of thinking.

"So rather than thinking of Dark Magic as inherently evil, try

practicing it with the frame of mind that, one day, it might enable you to help someone else. That might help you feel a bit more motivated," concluded Mr. Hart.

Ah, I see. I finally understood what he was trying to say. He had brought this up in order to raise my spirits, even just a little bit.

"Thank you so much." After picking up on Mr Hart's intentions, I had to thank him.

"Not at all. I was only speaking hypothetically." He smiled.

Just as we had come to a natural break in our conversation, we arrived at the entrance to the department where Mr. Hart had an appointment. I had never interacted with Mr. Hart one-on-one before. I knew he was good at his job, but outside of that I had only thought of him as an inconspicuous senior colleague who had no sense of direction and was always getting lost. I would have to amend my impression of him. He was a kind and dependable senior colleague.

"Well then, thanks again." Mr. Hart held up one hand to wave goodbye before heading in the opposite direction to the door he was meant to go through.

Without delay, I grabbed his arm and informed him, "Mr. Hart, the entrance is over here." Then I dragged him back in front of the door.

"Ah, curses. Thanks once again." This time, he knocked on the correct door before walking inside. In an instant, the feeling I had had a moment earlier—that he was a dependable senior colleague—faded slightly.

"It's me, Katarina Claes. May I enter?"

"Come on in," called someone from inside. As I entered the room, I found that, just as I expected, the voice belonged to Raphael, who was sitting at a desk and working. While Larna pushed her duties as our department chief to one side and delved deeper into her own magical research, it was in actuality her deputy chief, Raphael, who kept the department running. As a result, his workload was no joke.

I felt bad about asking him to instruct me in my Dark Magic training even under those circumstances.

But Raphael would always say, "Please, don't worry about it, Miss Katarina. Spending time with you like this makes for a pleasant break, so far from being a drain, I actually feel more

energized when I return to my other work." He really was a good mentor.

Raphael paused his work and stared intently at my face.

Not understanding the meaning of the look he gave me, I stared back at him blankly.

"Have you had a change of heart about our training?" Raphael asked.

"A change of heart?"

"Yes, Miss Katarina. You always seem a bit downcast before our Dark Magic training, but today I don't get that impression."

It appeared that my feelings on the subject had been uncovered not only by Mr. Hart, but by Raphael as well. But how? Was my face really so easy to read, just as Sora had claimed?

"Um, it sounds like I've been making you worry all this time. I'm sorry." I felt the need to apologize.

"No, no. In the first place, you were forced to engage in this training by orders from above, so it's understandable if your heart isn't in it," said Raphael.

That's true. I had been told to take part in this Dark Magic training because, even if I decoded the Dark Covenant, I was unable to leave any record of its contents unless I learned to use the spells within. Therefore, the top-ranking officials of the Magical Ministry had declared that they wanted me to try and learn to use its magic, at least the parts that were not dangerous. I was only studying it under those orders.

I had actually planned to have Sora, who could also use Dark Magic, teach me. However, as Sora was far too lacking in any sense of how to teach others, the task had instead fallen to Raphael. Raphael had been able to use Dark Magic himself in the past, though he no longer could.

"Well, my lack of enthusiasm was more to do with my feelings about Dark Magic itself, rather than the fact that I was ordered to learn it by higher-ups."

I explained to Raphael how I had felt that Dark Magic was not a good thing, and how my impression of it had changed as a result of what Mr. Hart had told me.

Once I had finished telling Raphael all of this, he mused, "What reason did the creator of Dark Magic have for creating it? I guess I'd never really thought about it."

"I hadn't given it much thought either, though I had always

assumed that whoever created Dark Magic had an evil reason for doing so."

"But that isn't necessarily the case. Quite so," remarked Raphael. After pausing for a moment, he continued, "For Marchioness Dieke, it was the fear of losing her son, Sirius, that drove her to use Dark Magic. Though her actions were still unforgivable, they were also the actions of a mother with a powerful desire to save her own son. It may not be quite right to judge what she did as purely evil."

Raphael is such an amazing person, being able to consider the feelings of the person who once killed his mother and stole his life from him. If it were me, I would not be able to think about her in that way.

Unsure of how I should respond, I remained silent for a while, searching for words to say.

Raphael noticed this, and spoke again. "Please, don't worry about me. Since I started working here at the Magical Ministry, I've found that my emotional trauma, which left me feeling so out of sorts, has been healing day by day. I'm at the point where I can speak calmly about what happened back then." After saying this, Raphael smiled slightly.

Wounds sustained within one's heart were different from physical scars, in that they were not visible to others. Therefore, if the one suffering from those wounds insisted that they were fine, those around them had no alternative but to believe that. Even if they were in fact only putting on a brave face, their metaphorical wounds still gushed emotional blood... But in Raphael's case, I didn't think he was lying or trying to act tough.

"I was feeling bad about asking you to help me with my Dark Magic training. I thought it might have been painful for you to remember the awful things that happened in your past..."

"Sounds like I've caused you a lot of concern. That's not how I feel, so don't worry. On the contrary, I'm actually delighted to have you all to myself for once, Miss Katarina," Raphael responded generously.

Raphael really is a kind person, saying such things after being burdened with a useless student like me.

"Now then, in order that you might one day be able to help someone using Dark Magic, let us make the most of today's training."

"Yes, sir," I replied enthusiastically. Then we commenced our

usual training.

My Dark Magic training for the day concluded, and it was time for my lunch break. After telling Raphael—who mentioned that he would eat the lunch he had brought while tidying up documents—not to work too hard, I headed to the Ministry cafeteria.

Hmmm, just what should I eat today? I wondered.

"Lady Katarina," a voice called out to me. *I'd know that adorable voice anywhere.*

"Maria." Turning around, I saw Maria, who had become my friend at the Academy of Magic, and was now also working at the Magical Ministry. She waved and walked toward me.

Maria was the very woman who was meant to be the protagonist of this otome game, and develop a series of dazzling romances with the romanceable characters of this world. For some reason, at the end of the story of *Fortune Lover*, when we were still at the academy, these interactions all led to a Friendship End. However, soon after joining the Ministry, her cuteness had already enthralled the head of her department and many of her colleagues who had joined at the same time.

"Are you about to have lunch?"

"Yep. I was just wondering what I should eat today."

"I am also about to go to lunch. Would you like to eat together?"

"Yep. Let's eat together." After Maria and I chose our meals, we found two vacant seats and sat down next to each other.

"By the way, Dewey isn't with you today, is he?"

Dewey, a romanceable character in *Fortune Lover II*, worked in the same department as Maria and was already completely under her thrall. They had joined the Ministry around the same time and were often seen together, but right now, Dewey was nowhere to be seen.

"Dewey has taken the day off. He said that he was going to go shopping with his family."

"Really? That's nice, isn't it?"

Dewey was a boy genius, who, after skipping ahead in school, became the youngest person to ever crack the Magical Ministry's difficult entrance examination. His parents, on the other hand, were horrible people who only ever treated their children as tools to be exploited, so Dewey and his siblings had suffered terribly.

But not too long ago, a lot happened to change this, and with the encouragement of the Magical Ministry, Dewey and his siblings were able to leave their horrible parents behind. Since leaving home, they had moved into a family-oriented house rented out by the Ministry, and lived without having to starve or shiver in the cold.

From what I'd heard, Dewey's older brother had been put to work as a child and had never been to school. But now, while working at a job the Ministry had helped him find, he was going to school, and seemed to find his days very fulfilling. I was so glad to hear that.

"Lady Katarina, is Sora not with you today?" asked Maria, returning my question about Dewey by asking about my usual comrade, Sora.

That's right. Just as Maria and Dewey were known around the Ministry for working together, Sora and I tended to work as a pair. Come to think of it, although we usually ran into each other near the cafeteria, today we hadn't. Though I guess we hadn't exactly agreed to go to lunch together, even if we did run into each other.

"We're working separately today," I replied. In the past, since we were both new and were given the same sort of work, we had eaten together, but on days when we had different tasks, and therefore did not see each other, we rarely did so.

Incidentally, Sora, who was starting to be treated as inseparable from me, was one of the romanceable characters in *Fortune Lover II*. But as I was generally the one interacting with him, it was difficult for a game event between him and Maria to occur. So he did not yet seem to be head over heels for her, unlike Dewey and Cyrus, the other romanceable characters introduced in this sequel. Although, perhaps because of how many experiences Sora had had in the past, he was less likely than me to show his emotions on his face, so it might be difficult to uncover his true feelings.

"May I sit here?"

Perhaps it was because I had been talking about him, but when I turned around to find out who had spoken to me, I saw Sora standing there, holding a tray and grinning.

"Ah, Sora. I'm sorry. I couldn't find you today, so I started eating without you," I apologized reflexively.

"Nah, I was behind with my work anyway, so I don't mind at all. Besides, it's not as if we had promised to eat together. Ah, by

the way, I brought someone else with me. Department Chief Lanchester." Looking over his shoulder, Sora called out to Cyrus, who came over with his shoulders slightly hunched.

"Oh, Lord Cyrus! This is a surprise. We don't often see you in the cafeteria."

Department Chief Cyrus Lanchester was head of the Magic and Magical Powers Research Department, the staffers of which were considered the star players of the Magical Ministry. He was a cool and beautiful man who also was good at his job. As he didn't talk much, and acted aloof, he could come off as hard to approach, but even so, given his pretty face and his professional prowess, he was of course a subject of longing for many single women in society.

But there was another side to Cyrus. Because he had been raised in a rural village near the kingdom's border, he had not developed any specific immunity against young women. So unless it involved work, he would always get nervous around women, and could not communicate well with them. His symptoms had been especially bad shortly after he had joined the Ministry. They had been made worse by the young noblewomen here in the capital, who teased him mercilessly for his regional accent. When he told me his story, he admitted that he had never before interacted with young women outside of work.

The only ones around here who knew this fact about Cyrus were me—who he looked upon as a granny who liked farming, and therefore felt comfortable around—and Maria, the object of his affection.

There was a possibility that Sora, who was very sharp, had also realized this, but he didn't dare to say anything on the subject. Anyway, that being the case with Cyrus, he never came to the cafeteria, which was full of people—and, more to the point, young women. So we were surprised to see him now.

As if reading my mind, Cyrus said, "Recently, I've started to avail myself of the cafeteria. For the sake of my future, I thought there were a number of things I should get used to." I noticed that, for a moment, his gaze turned to Maria. Cyrus was attracted to Maria's kindness and warmth. Recently, Maria had started to participate in working on the vegetable plot we furtively kept on Ministry grounds. Through this, along with the self-defense lessons she had asked Cyrus for, Cyrus had slowly, at a tortoise's pace, started to become more friendly with Maria, and was now able to

converse with her a little.

When Maria did not join us on our vegetable plot, Cyrus spoke excitedly to me, a so-called farming granny, about how happy this relationship progress made him. To think that this cool beauty, who gave off an air of having long since tired of dalliances with women, in fact turned beet red each time he so much as touched a woman's hand during self-defense lessons. I couldn't help but think of him as my adorable little brother.

I guess that he had not only come to the cafeteria he had previously avoided in order to get used to women, but thinking that he would like to spend even a little more time with Maria if he could.

Apart from that, having observed that Dewey—who had received some advice on romance from Sora—had recently begun to pursue Maria more proactively, Cyrus probably felt that he needed to try harder himself. But for the time being, Cyrus was sitting opposite me.

Huh? There's a seat empty opposite Maria, why wouldn't you seize your chance to sit across from her? Isn't that why you're here? I thoughtlessly glanced in Cyrus's direction as I thought this, but he only looked away awkwardly. I guess it was too much to expect him to sit across from Maria while he ate. *Is he really romanceable in* Fortune Lover II*? How is he ever supposed to end up with Maria?*

As Cyrus had sat opposite me, Sora sat opposite Maria. I did not know how Sora felt about Maria, but in contrast to Cyrus, Sora seemed to be quite used to interacting with women. If he were attracted to Maria and decided to pursue her seriously, I bet Cyrus would lose her immediately.

"Have you had a tough time at work today?" I inquired of Sora. He had previously admitted that he had been falling behind with his work more than usual.

"The work is no different than usual, but fewer of our senior colleagues are around today, so I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed."

"Ah, that's right. Laura and Mr. Cornish are out of the office today, aren't they?" I recalled seeing them leave that very morning, wearing their mysterious...disguises?

Though the Magical Ministry was the most prestigious place to work in the kingdom, it was also known for taking on nearly any kind of work. So it was not uncommon for the Ministry to receive requests from citizens to do grunt work outside its premises, such as

pest control. In particular, our department, the Magical Tool Laboratory, had a lot of miscellaneous tasks thrown at it.

"If we're shorthanded, perhaps I should be getting back to the office?" After lunch, the task of decoding the Dark Covenant, and my never-ending battle with sleepiness, awaited me. If I was honest, it wasn't a task I particularly wanted to do—actually, I didn't want to do it at all—so I made this offer thinking that work in the department would be preferable.

"No, it's not as overwhelming as that," said Sora, before stealing a glance at Cyrus.

Cyrus nodded firmly, agreeing with Sora. "You must prioritize decoding the covenant, Miss Claes. You are to perform that task." His tone was resolute.

I reluctantly answered, "Yes, sir."

Seeing how despondent I looked, Maria, who would herself be working on decoding the Light Covenant, tried to encourage me, saying, "Let's do our best."

"Yeah. Wake me up if I start to fall asleep, okay?" I replied, already feeling close to dozing off.

"If eating makes you sleepy, why don't you try eating less?" asked Sora, looking at my lunch tray piled with food.

"Come on... If I don't eat lots of tasty food at lunchtime, I won't be able to work hard in the afternoon." As I assumed an expression of staunch refusal, Sora smiled wryly.

Once we had all brought up a few points of small talk, our conversation turned to a new topic. We decided to discuss which students at the Academy of Magic were likely to be invited to work at the Ministry next year.

"Oh, so it's already time for the invitations to start going out?" I mused.

"Come to think of it, I have a feeling that it was around this time of year that the Magical Ministry first reached out to me," noted Maria, as if recalling her invitation to the Ministry at that very moment.

"Is that so? They reached out as early as that?" I was surprised, as the next cohort of academy graduates still had nearly six months of school left.

Cyrus explained, "Any workplace seeking talented individuals is the same. It's essential to reach out earlier rather than later. Moreover, as the Magical Ministry shares its grounds with the

Academy of Magic, employees at the Ministry are often asked to teach at the academy. So the relationship between the institutions is strong, and Ministry officials have a good idea of the kind of students currently enrolled at the academy. Given all of this, they can start sending out invitations early."

This rang a bell. "Now that you mention it, I remember one of my teachers at the academy saying that he had come from the Magical Ministry. Was that in order to find exceptional students?"

"In the first place, employees of the Ministry are called on to teach because there just aren't many people who can teach magic well, but they are also likely motivated by a desire to identify exceptional students as quickly as possible, so they can invite the best students to the Ministry early," replied Cyrus.

"That makes sense," I mused. In that case, the fact that Maria had been approached so early was perfectly logical. After all, Maria was a wonderful girl with strong magical aptitude and exceptional grades.

Ah, that's right. If the Magical Ministry typically contacted such exceptional potential recruits in that fashion...

"Um, I happen to know some students on the academy's student council who have their hearts set on joining the Magical Ministry. Do you think the Ministry is likely to approach them as well?" I ventured to ask, remembering Fray and Ginger. Although Ginger was slightly lacking in magic, they were both exceptional students. If they so wished, I was sure they would receive a recommendation.

"Let me see. If they're good enough academically to be members of the student council, then they'll have already received their invitations. Though that would depend on them not having family duties to inherit."

"Ah, I see your point. People with family duties to inherit cannot join the Magical Ministry, can they..."

Keith, my adoptive brother, and Nicol, for example, were going to take over the duties of running their households, so they were already working alongside their fathers. I guess someone with that role to fulfill wouldn't also be able to work at the Magical Ministry.

"As for me, I have an older brother, so I was free to work wherever I wanted and chose the Ministry, but there are many restrictions placed on those who will take over the running of their households," continued Cyrus.

Hmmm. Though I had not been aware of many such situations

in my previous life, in this world, more often than not, children would one day take over their parents' work, and could not live according to their own wishes.

In my case, though I was currently working at the Magical Ministry, I still felt pressured to get married one day and look after domestic duties. Life felt more constrained in this world than it had in my previous life. Well, in my previous world I only lived as a student, so I might have found many more differences if I had experienced working life back then as well.

Ginger came from a house of low-ranking nobles, and she also had brothers, so I had the feeling that she would have no problem joining the Ministry. She had said herself that she wanted to work and send money home.

But what about Fray? Now that I thought about it, I really knew nothing about her family circumstances. I was pretty sure that she was still being treated as the daughter of the marquess, but didn't that mean that she would be expected to marry soon after graduation? I had heard that was a typical progression for high-ranking noblewomen. *Though for some reason, that doesn't seem to be the case for many of the girls around me...*

Still, if Fray herself had a strong desire to work here, and the marquess already had a successor, then there shouldn't be a problem with her joining the Ministry. I remembered how her eyes had sparkled as she talked about the future. I definitely wanted her to be able to work here.

"I don't know too much about their family circumstances, but I know they really want to work here, so I hope the Ministry can accept them," I said, indirectly referring to Ginger and Fray.

"Very well. Getting exceptional recruits is a good thing for us too. I'll briefly check out the recruitment process myself," Cyrus responded, helpfully.

"Thank you so much." With one of the Ministry's leaders on my side—and Cyrus, the head of the Ministry's top department, at that—I was sure that everything would be fine.

In the course of that discussion we finished our lunch, and, as usual, I went together with Maria to the room we were borrowing to work on decoding the covenants. Just as I expected, the moment I sat down, I started to feel sleepy. So I tried taking some big stretches and rotating my arms, somehow managing to fight off my drowsiness. I couldn't let it win every time.

Not being able to read ancient script, I had barely managed to decode any of my covenant. That being said, there were a lot of warning messages to work through, delaying me from getting to the various descriptions of magic, so that was another reason for my lack of progress. The Dark Covenant had a ton of warnings written in it. “Be wary of this,” “You must not do that,” and so forth. Perhaps the person who wrote it was just a worrywart, but in any case, when they wrote, they had tried to communicate that one should not use Dark Magic lightly. Excessively so.

“Hey, Maria. Are there a lot of warnings written in the Covenant of Light?” I asked her as she was working right beside me.

“Yes, I think there are some. There are at least a few places where it is noted that one should not use its contents heedlessly. But not very many.”

Though I would not have expected it to contain over ten pages of warnings, I was a little bit surprised to hear that the Covenant of Light even needed a warning not to treat its contents casually at all.

“But why does it need to say that? Isn’t Light Magic a wonderful thing that heals people?”

“I suppose it is. Being able to heal people’s wounds may be a good thing, but perhaps it could be dangerous to rely on it too much?”

“Dangerous? But how?”

“Well… Though it is not written explicitly, and this is only my guess based on the text, here is an example. If one can use Light Magic to heal any wounds, one may start to think that, as long as one does not die, injuries do not pose a problem.”

“I see. That sounds possible.” *If it were me, I might end up thinking that way.*

“If one goes down that path, one’s sense of fear and peril toward injury will start to fade away. There might be more people who go too far and lose their lives. The overuse of Light Magic could lead one to think that it is fine to hurt people’s feelings, or that there is no problem with being reckless. I think there is a danger of fostering that kind of conceited thinking.”

I had never considered Light Magic to be anything other than a wonderful power that could heal people, so I would have thought that the more one used it, the more people one could bring happiness to. But I had to agree with what Maria had said. If one thought that one’s wounds could always be mended by magic, it

could give rise to careless behavior. You might think that there would be no problem with a little recklessness.

"You're very wise, Maria. I had never thought about it as far as that."

"Oh, no, I just somehow felt that that's what the warnings written here were trying to say," Maria replied modestly. But I thought it was amazing that she had managed to read between the lines like that. When I read all the warnings in my covenant, I hadn't thought anything except that the person who wrote them was probably a worrywart.

Struck by how deeply she considered various matters, I felt like asking Maria about Dark Magic. I told her about the conversation I had had with Mr. Hart that morning.

"The reason Dark Magic was created? Though I have never really thought about it either, I certainly am curious about it now," said Maria, before assuming a thinking pose.

"Yeah. I had always assumed that someone bad created it in order to control people, but I guess we'll never know the truth."

"When I first became aware of the existence of Dark Magic, I thought that its only purpose was to control people's minds, but now I know that it can do many other things."

That's true. The first time we encountered Dark Magic, we perceived that it was chiefly used to control people's minds—in particular, to amplify the emotions that people already had. But since meeting that woman with black hair, Sarah, we had learned that there was more to Dark Magic.

It could be used to create familiars or other dimensions, or to launch attacks. We had learned that its uses could branch out in many directions. There were still many mysteries about Dark Magic—a form of magic that did not exist in nature. For what purpose it had been created, no one knew.

However, I felt like my way of thinking about Dark Magic, which before this I had only judged as scary, had changed slightly.

Okay, let's get down to decoding the covenant, with gusto! Or, so I thought, but gusto alone would not change the pace of the decoding process, which I had to do with a dictionary in one hand. I managed to achieve about the same amount of progress as usual before the work day was over.

When I headed home from work each day, I usually walked to the Ministry gates with Sora, so at some point it had become a

habit. Today, however, because our senior colleagues had gone to work outside the office, and Sora had to cover their responsibilities as well, he hadn't finished by the time I left. I thought about helping him, but I was told that they weren't as shorthanded as that, and to please go home. So I headed for the gates by myself.

As I walked to the gates alone, I spied the two senior coworkers I had seen that morning, coming the other way in their disguises.

"Laura, Mr. Cornish. You look tired. Have you finished your work for the day?" I called out to them.

"Yes, all done for today. I had to pay careful attention to how I spoke, among other things, so I am more tired than usual," answered Laura, puffing out her cheeks. With how Laura usually looked, I thought this mannerism suited her—or at least, I was used to it—but in the guise of a typical, muscular man, it made for an odd impression.

"Ah... I am very tired myself. Pretending to be plain was painful in itself, but having to spend the day with my beautiful face made up to look like this was difficult to bear. I want my regular face back, at once!" cried Mr. Cornish, almost shouting, as he embraced himself.

In the past, I would have brushed this off as the behavior of a very weird senior colleague, but after all I had heard that day, I knew he was playing this character for the sake of Miss Norman, so I felt a little bit moved by it.

"Huh, what's the matter, Miss Claes? You hungry or something? I'm afraid I have nothing for you to eat," said Mr. Cornish, needlessly raising his arms and waving them dramatically. His pose emphasized the message that he had "Nothing, nothing at all."

"Oh, no, no," I said. *Huh, where did that feeling come from?* It was strange. As I watched Mr. Cornish's exaggerated gestures, I felt those sentimental feelings ebb away. It was also strange that, when seeing me fall silent, most people assumed I was hungry.

"Oh, my oh, my, I nearly forgot. I do have this. Give me your hand, darling," Laura said to me. I did as I was instructed, and Laura placed a piece of candy, in adorable wrapping paper, in the palm of my hand. "Enjoy."

"Thank you very much." *Looks like Laura thought I was hungry too. How odd.* Although I wasn't actually hungry, I was still happy to receive the candy.

"Now then, we're off to submit our report. Take care on your

way home," called Laura before walking away, dragging Mr. Cornish behind her with one hand and waving with the other.

Strangely, even though she was not wearing women's clothing today, and was for all the world a macho man, I found myself wanting to call her "mom."

Come to think of it, Sora mentioned that Laura might have some secrets of her own, didn't he? If the kind and cheerful Laura did have secrets, I was pretty sure that they would not be very serious. That was because she was always so cheerful, always smiling, and never gloomy. Even so, if she was harboring a serious secret underneath her cheerful smile, I was convinced that it was not something I should investigate too casually. One should not try to expose what others are desperate to conceal. Well, regardless of what she may be hiding, nothing would change the fact that she was my kind and dependable senior colleague.

After seeing the two of them off, I headed back to the gates myself.

Once I had made it home, after dozing off in my horse-drawn carriage as usual, I found that Keith and my father had not come back yet. Apparently, something urgent had come up in their work and they would be home late that night. For my father, who always put family first, this was rare.

In the end, when it was time for dinner they were still not home, so I had dinner with my mother. This dinner between a mother and her daughter alone, the first we had had in a very long time, could have just as well have been called an interrogation.

She asked me, "Are you doing your job properly at the Magical Ministry?" among other such questions.

I guess as far as my mother was concerned, her daughter would always be a handful, and she would always worry. But the subject of her concerns had hardly changed since I was a kid. *Mother, your daughter is now a working adult. You will not find me climbing trees or fishing at work. Well, I do indulge in a bit of gardening—it is my hobby, after all.*

My dinner with my mother ended, and by the time I had finished getting ready for bed, it looked like Keith and my father were still not home. While I thought about just how rare this was, I remembered that I had work again tomorrow, and got into bed.

As I was staring vacantly at the ceiling, for some reason, the

conversation with Mr. Hart I had had that day, about the reason why Dark Magic was created, crossed my mind. *Just who created it, and for what purpose?* Perhaps when I made some headway in decoding the Dark Covenant, we would find some answers to those questions.

Come to think of it, Katarina in Fortune Lover II *was supposed to have finished decoding the Dark Covenant and mastered its magic, right? Why is the Katarina in the sequel game more capable than me? But wait, if she was so capable, why would she come back to get caught after already being exiled from the kingdom? Looking at it that way, perhaps she was no cleverer than me after all?*

On top of that, what did she think she was doing getting in between the protagonist and the new romanceable characters in Fortune Lover II*, when there were still so many other characters? Didn't she need to get in the way of Jeord and Keith anymore? Wasn't there a need to see that through?*

Hmm, that's right. Fortune Lover II *doesn't only feature Katarina, but the rival characters from the first game. If I remember correctly, the protagonist can interact with each of the rival characters, and, if the protagonist manages to get along with them, and they recognize her value, then her romance will progress. This is all according to a mysterious note I found, written in Japanese, hidden between the pages of an old book.*

For Alan, there was Mary, and Nicol would be accompanied by Sophia, but what about Jeord and Keith? Would Katarina be the protagonist's rival for those routes as well? Hold on, in that case Katarina wouldn't be available to get in the way of the new characters. However light on her feet Katarina might be, between Jeord, Keith, and all the new characters, there were just too many people to deal with. I don't think she'd be able to get in everyone's way... How was that supposed to work?

If only I could have a dream about that part of the story, but will I ever have another one of those dreams about Acchan? Maybe if I fall asleep while thinking about my past life, it'll happen? Hmmm, but I've never managed to have one just by wanting to before.

But I guess I'll give it a try anyway. My past life, otome games, manga, anime, sweets, cup ramen, potato chips, ummm...what else?

"Lady Katarina, it's morning. Time to get up."

I awoke to the sound of Anne's voice, as always. Somehow, I

had the feeling that my dream last night had been a pleasant one, full of food.

"Please get up and get ready. It's nearly time for you to depart for the Magical Ministry."

As always, Anne briskly set about helping me get ready for work. Though I was still half asleep, I found that by leaving it to her, I was soon ready. After wolfing down my breakfast, I headed to my horse-drawn carriage. Though the Claes family had dinner together most days, more often than not, we ate breakfast separately. I suppose with everyone working, our schedules did not necessarily align. So today, as usual, I ate breakfast alone. I intended to hop straight in the carriage and head to the Ministry afterward. However, for some reason, on my way to the carriage, my father made an appearance.

"Good morning, father. Is something the matter?" Since my father had arrived home late last night, I thought he would still be resting, but perhaps he was so busy that he had to leave for work early today as well?

"Good morning, Katarina. Actually, I need to speak with you for a moment."

"Oh, what about?"

"Well, the truth is that, starting today, I've been thinking of having some guards escort you on your way."

"G-Guards, you say?!" I was seriously shocked by this sudden development. *Well, I suppose it's normal for someone of my rank to be escorted by guards.*

But in the area where I was normally active, around the capital city of Sorcié, public order was well established, so the subject of my being escorted by guards had never come up before.

So what need is there, all of a sudden? Besides, I was on my way to the Magical Ministry, which was regarded as being as safe as a castle. Surely there was no need for me to have guards.

"Why do I need guards all of a sudden? Has an old nemesis of yours returned, father?" Though my father was fundamentally a peaceful, reasonable person, when matters concerned his family, he had a tendency to get carried away. Perhaps on one of those occasions he found himself an enemy?

"No, I have no nemesis, but recently, I've been caught up with a troublesome individual. So I'm taking necessary measures. Has Keith told you about the disagreement with Marquess Randall's

family?"

Marquess Randall... Does he mean Lady Susanna's family? Now that you mention it, Keith did say something to the effect of "Be careful," didn't he?

"Yes. He told me that the marquess has a strong desire to accumulate power, and seems to be frustrated by the fact that Lady Susanna and Prince Jeffrey are not yet married."

"That's right. And that frustration has led him to meddle in our affairs, in all sorts of ways. This is why it is troublesome when someone is powerful, but not very popular."

Ah, so he's not very popular. Because he was Lady Susanna's father, I had previously imagined him having a similar friendly personality, but I guess I was wrong.

Hold on, didn't Keith say that Lady Susanna and her father don't get along? For that to be the case, I guess he would have to be a difficult person.

"So you think the marquess might try to do something to me?" I had never met the man, and it was not as if harming me would help him obtain power. Quite the contrary; if he incurred the wrath of my father, who loved his family deeply, it could not end well for him.

"Of course, I don't want to even think about that, but to appeal to his sense of reason, and stop him getting any ideas, I think it would be best for you to travel with guards. As for when you're at the Magical Ministry, I've made other arrangements with the institution, so you'll only need Claes family guards when you travel to and from the Ministry by carriage."

"Oh, right. I understand," I responded enthusiastically.

"Just be careful. I will see you later." My father then waved to me and left. Apparently he had only come to announce that I would be guarded for the time being.

But guards, really...? If I have to travel in the carriage with other people, especially people who aren't Anne or Keith...I'll feel reluctant about falling fast asleep.

As for my security at the Ministry, as my work often involved classified information, like my study of Dark Magic, I guessed that I would be guarded by someone within the Ministry, but unless it was someone I already knew very well, that would bother me.

What a pain. I then realized that instead of worrying about the nuisance of being accompanied by guards, I should be worried

about what Marquess Randall might try to do.

With a sigh, I stepped into the carriage, and was surprised to learn that rather than boarding the carriage with me, my guards were to follow me on horseback. I was relieved by the thought that I could still fall fast asleep if I wanted, no problem.

Incidentally, my guards turned out to be some young men who had often helped me with field work in the past. Today was my first time learning that their actual role in the Claes household was to stand guard.

“Huh? My Lady, just what did you think we were here for?” asked one of the young men.

I gave them my honest answer. “I thought you were here to help with the gardening.” Then they all sighed.

Well, you know... It’s not as if I needed guards around me up until now... Oh, hang on, on those occasions that they followed me to the garden, were they in fact guarding me?

And so, although my carriage was accompanied by guards, I started on my work commute, doing nothing out of the ordinary myself.

Chapter 3: Guards

Since I was still alone in the carriage as I headed to work, I was able to doze off completely, just as I always did. Before I knew it, we had arrived at the Magical Ministry, and the driver of the carriage was waking me up.

For the walk from the carriage to the Ministry gates, I was accompanied by my guards. *I kind of feel like the daughter of a noble house. Ah, but of course, I* am *the daughter of a noble house!*

When I arrived at the gates, for some reason Sora was waiting there for me.

"Good morning," Sora politely greeted me and the guards.

"Good morning. Please take care of the young lady," one of the guards replied. Then they left. I watched the entire interaction with a question mark hanging over my head.

"Um... Sora, what's going on?" I inquired, while watching the guardsmen depart from behind.

"On this day, I will be undertaking the duty of guarding Lady Katarina Claes at the Magical Ministry. My name is Sora Smith. I look forward to serving you." Sora bowed gracefully, in the style of a butler, just the way he had when we first met.

"Wha— You're my guard at the Ministry?!"

Seeing how shocked I was, Sora looked puzzled himself. "Haven't you heard?"

At that moment, I remembered what my father had said to me before I left home that morning: "As for when you're at the Magical Ministry, I've made other arrangements with the institution."

That's right, he might have mentioned something about asking someone at the Ministry.

"I was told I'd have another guard here... But is that really going to be you, Sora?"

"Yeah. We are in the same department, and I'm already aware of your various circumstances, so I was deemed the most suitable."

That's certainly true. Sora is aware of my involvement in Dark Magic, as well as the existence of the Dark Covenant... Maria's covenant

too. There probably isn't anyone more suitable...

"But, Sora, don't you have your own work to do? I'd feel bad about having to ask you to worry about guarding me instead." As an employee of the Magical Tool Laboratory, Sora had already taken on a lot of work, so if he had to step away to guard me, it would be tough on the department.

"Ah, don't worry about that. Duke Claes made a formal request to the Magical Ministry to have you protected, and offered compensation, so even if I have to step away from my usual duties, the Ministry can send someone from another department to cover my work."

"I see. So father made a formal request to the Ministry." Because the Ministry already did all kinds of odd jobs, I had heard of them receiving requests to protect people in the past, but as for one employee guarding another internally—that somehow seemed strange.

"Still, you have a great dad."

"Huh? My father?"

"Yeah. I mean, he respects your wishes, doesn't he? Rather than appointing guards for you, it would have been easier for him to just order you to take time off from work and stay at home."

When Sora pointed this out to me, I was startled. That was because he was absolutely right. Though I now felt there was purpose in my work, and I wanted to do the best job that I could, at first I went into it with the aim of avoiding my marriage to Jeord. I did not feel ready to join the royal family yet, so I fled.

In fact, people had made all sorts of remarks about me, like "That duke's daughter is just killing time, she won't be here for long." Even my father had probably heard similar remarks in his workplace. There were many people who did not look favorably upon a daughter of a noble family old enough to marry entering the workforce.

In spite of that, instead of telling his daughter, who had earned him no praise from the people around him, to take a break from her job, my father still sent me to work, even when it meant appointing guards. This along with the fact that he had not hurried me into marriage meant that, yes, my father really did always respect my feelings.

I truly was blessed to have the family I had—in my past life as well as in this one.

“I really am lucky,” I muttered to myself, without thinking.

“Yeah, lucky you,” agreed Sora, smiling at me.

“Yep. Well, Sora, I’d be very happy to have you guard me.”

“Please, leave it to me.” He bowed respectfully.

So it was that I headed to our department with Sora, who had assumed the aura of a well-trained butler. I knocked on the door to the Magical Tool Laboratory before entering. Under normal circumstances—as Sora was with me today—I would have expected to be the first one to arrive, but today others had preceded us.

“Oh my, good morning.” There was Laura, who today was once again disguised as a muscular man.

“Oh, morning newbies.” With her was Mr. Cornish. Like yesterday, he, too, was in disguise, wearing normal (plain) clothes and makeup. It looked like they were about to go out on a mission again.

“Will you be working outside of the office again today?” I asked them.

In response, Mr. Cornish assumed an exaggerated pose of despair, and lamented, “Yes, that’s right. Once again, I must play the role of a plain person, wearing these plain clothes. The world weeps at the loss of a beauty such as me.”

Mr. Cornish only acts this way for Miss Norman’s sake. For Miss Norman’s sake. So I told myself inside my head.

“Why, yes. Looking after this idiot has really tired me out, so I would have preferred to polish this task off quickly, but easier said than done, I suppose. It looks like it will take a while longer.” Laura placed her hands on her cheeks and sighed. Even though she looked like an ordinary man at this moment, her mannerisms were the same as usual. Somehow, this was more than a little disconcerting.

However, I was more concerned by the thought that our senior colleagues would continue to be working outside the office, like yesterday, which would mean...

“So, our department will be shorthanded again today. Given that, is it really all right for you to have to accompany me all day?” I once again felt bad about monopolizing Sora to serve as my bodyguard.

“It’s fine, they’ve said a number of people more talented than me are coming to help,” Sora answered casually, though I knew that, despite him being a relatively new employee, our senior colleagues already considered Sora to be very talented and good at

his job. With that in mind, I was even more concerned about depriving the department of this skilled worker.

Father, just how much did you pay to hire him?

"Hmm, what's this about?" asked Laura with a puzzled expression. She had overheard the discussion between Sora and me. It appeared that our senior colleagues had not already been informed of the fact that Sora would be guarding me.

I explained that Sora had received a request from my father, via the Magical Ministry, to be my bodyguard.

Laura considered this. "Oh, really? So Sora will be your bodyguard. Of course, you are the daughter of a duke, Lady Katarina, however you might look. Though given the way you act, I just keep forgetting,"

The way I act? Once again, I was not sure whether my senior colleague was praising me or insulting me.

"But you've been working here normally up until now. Why the sudden change?" asked Laura.

"Ah... Um... Well..." I thought to myself, *Is it really okay for me to talk to my colleagues about the matter my family is tangled up in with Marquess Randall?*

Laura, perceptive as ever, understood how I was feeling instantly. "If you're not able to talk about it, don't let me force you." She gave me a smile. When it came to being thoughtful, Laura was an expert, I reflected with admiration. "But if your situation requires you to have a bodyguard all of a sudden, I must tell you to be careful," she continued, with a serious expression on her face.

Next to Laura, Mr. Cornish, who seemed like he hadn't listened to a word of our conversation, added, "Yeah, be careful," with an earnest look on his face.

Was it perhaps kind of a big deal to be escorted by guards at the Magical Ministry? As the person being escorted, I had not really felt that this was the case myself.

After warning me to be careful once more for good measure, my two senior colleagues went off to work, still complaining about their disguises.

After we had watched Laura and Mr. Cornish leave, I asked Sora, "I wonder, is it kind of a big deal to be escorted by guards at the Magical Ministry?"

"It still hasn't been that long since I started working here, so I

can't say for certain, but I've never seen an employee here with guards before," he responded.

"I-I guess you're right." I had never seen one either, even though many workers at the Magical Ministry came from noble families. I suppose that showed just how safe the Ministry was considered to be.

The Kingdom of Sorcié, the most prosperous of the group of neighboring kingdoms to which it belonged, was known to be very safe. Furthermore, the areas in which I was typically active—the royal palace, the Academy of Magic, and the Magical Ministry—were particularly safe places even within Sorcié. Nothing bad had ever happened in these places, not even to a young noblewoman strutting around by herself.

Though I had imagined that that was how those places had always been, I recalled the time the royal family summoned me to their castle and told me their story. They told me how there had been a fearsome struggle for the throne within the royal palace, during which some had even had their lives taken from them. This had also involved the use of Dark Magic. I reflected that although Sorcié was a wealthy country, not everyone who lived here was a good person. I was definitely aware of this, but I was still just a bit shocked to have encountered someone requiring so much caution that I needed to have guards to escort me.

Marquess Randall. Though I had never met the man face-to-face, what I did know was that my father had never been so wary of someone before that he had felt the need to take such measures.

I wondered if Lady Susanna, his daughter, was in any danger. But they had spent many years together as father and daughter, and seemed to not be living together at the moment, so she would probably be fine. Besides, Lady Susanna had Prince Jeffrey. He was someone who even Jeord admired. I was sure he would do whatever it took to protect Lady Susanna.

In that case, I should take appropriate actions to protect myself and the people who worried about me. I resolved to do so. Still, I could not help but wish that Marquess Randall would lose interest in the Claes family.

While Sora and I were performing our morning duties, cleaning the office in preparation for the work day, the rest of our senior colleagues arrived one after the other. Incidentally, because Larna

was out of the office today on official—not personal—business, responsibility for the department fell to her deputy chief Raphael. As a result, my Dark Magic class with him would have to be postponed.

Also, because Raphael was temporarily in charge of the department, he had been made aware of the fact that Sora had been hired to be my bodyguard.

"Sora, please take good care of Miss Claes. She is someone very dear to all of us." Raphael almost sounded like a character in one of the television dramas I recalled from my past life.

Hey, what kind of line is that? It was father, I bet. Father said that when he made the request, didn't he? Curse my adoring father. How can he be so embarrassing?

To make matters worse, Sora bowed respectfully and replied, "Yes, sir. Of course I will."

You didn't have to say that, Sora. Though I was still feeling extremely embarrassed, today I would contend with my work decoding the covenant starting first thing in the morning. To the extent that I would feel less sleepy than I normally would when starting after lunch, I thought that it might seem easier today. And even if I did fall asleep, having my bodyguard Sora with me meant I would have someone right there to wake me up.

When I arrived at the room Maria and I were sharing as we decoded our respective covenants, Maria was already there. And for some reason, I found Cyrus standing next to her. Cyrus, the busy head of the Magic and Magical Powers Research Department, almost never came here.

"Mr. Cyrus, what brings you here at this hour?" I inquired.

Cyrus raised an eyebrow slightly. "Ah, Lady Katarina. I have something I'd like to ask you about..."

Though he had broached the subject casually, I could scarcely believe what Cyrus wanted to talk about.

After I had talked to him about my juniors at the academy over lunch the previous day, Cyrus, who was known for working quickly, had apparently set about investigating their prospects at the Ministry after work that very day. In the course of doing so, he had discovered something unexpected, so he had come to confirm the truth of the matter with me and Maria.

Firstly, he had found that although Ginger's magic was not especially powerful, she was a truly brilliant student, and because she had a lot of brothers, there was no question of her having to inherit the responsibilities of her family. He had checked with the Ministry and they could see no problem with scouting her. But in Fray's case, there was a problem.

To my amazement, I was told that Fray Randall had begun to introduce herself as the fiancée of Jeord Stuart, the thirdborn prince.

"Uwa?" At first, this was all I had to say on the matter. After all, I had no idea what he was talking about. There was only one Jeord Stuart, thirdborn prince in this kingdom. And at present, I was pretty sure that he was *my* fiancé. If our engagement had been broken off, no one had told me about it. On the contrary, I had just recently told Jeord about my feelings, after my father had asked me what I intended to do about our engagement... *Hold on, could it be that after that, Jeord lost interest in me and decided to break it off?*

No, I had not heard anything of the sort, and besides, just the other day, we were working in the fields together. Moreover, Fray was also there, and she had not said anything about it. I mean, it was there that she told me how much she wanted to work at the Magical Ministry, her eyes sparkling with excitement...

"What does this mean?" I asked Cyrus, drawing closer to him.

"I don't know what's going on either—that's why I came to ask you and Maria..." Cyrus wore a troubled expression on his face.

"I-I see. Please excuse me."

"No, no. Though, really, what *does* this mean? You, Lady Katarina, are supposed to be Prince Jeord's fiancée... If only I hailed from the kingdom's interior myself, I would have a few more ways to investigate the matter." Cyrus placed a hand on his forehead.

"Is your birthplace of some relevance, Mr. Cyrus?"

"Yeah. Though I have connections here at the Ministry, as I'm originally from a village near the border, I'm not well acquainted with the nobles here in the heart of the kingdom. That makes it difficult to gather information about them."

Oh yeah. As the son of a margrave, Cyrus was raised in a region at the further reaches of the kingdom. There had been no young women there, which is why he has a hard time with them now.

Cyrus looked at me. "I wonder if it might not be easier for you to ascertain the veracity of such information, Lady Katarina?"

True, I am the daughter of a duke, born and raised in the heart of this country. From the perspective of rural nobles like Cyrus, I guess I could be called a bona fide noblewoman from the center of the kingdom.

However, I'm sorry to say that I'm not capable of doing anything so sophisticated as "ascertaining the veracity of information." That's the kind of thing I'm worst at.

"I'm...really no good at gathering that kind of information," I confessed as I looked back at Cyrus, trying to express all of my feelings in those few words.

Cyrus accepted this response with a look of disappointment on his face, or perhaps I should say he looked pitiful. It seemed that I had managed to convey my feelings. As he stared at me with that lamentable look, I quickly averted my own eyes.

"By the way, what are you doing here, Sora Smith? Do you have some business here as well?" wondered Cyrus, addressing Sora behind me. It seemed that his plan was to change the subject. Or rather, the fact that Sora was acting as my bodyguard may not have been communicated to Cyrus, who belonged to another department, so he could have genuinely been wondering what Sora was doing there.

"The Magical Ministry received a request from Duke Claes to have his daughter assigned a bodyguard, so starting today, I will be responsible for the safety of Lady Katarina Claes." Sora explained the matter in much the same way he had done for Laura and Mr. Cornish.

Cyrus's expression turned to one of puzzlement. "A bodyguard? For Miss Katarina? She's never needed one before, so why should she need one now?"

Well, I guess that's true. Up until now I've come to work just as I pleased, without being escorted by guards.

"Well, umm, a lot happened between some of us nobles, leading to one thing or another, and so father decided that I would have to be accompanied by guards," I answered evasively, not knowing whether this was something I should speak about too readily to Cyrus.

Cyrus seemed to be able to pick up on the gist of my circumstances. "I guess a lot does go on between nobles, especially in the center of the kingdom." He nodded, then muttered, "What on earth is the House of Randall thinking?"

Startled, I raised my head again and cried, "Wha— Mr. Cyrus, has the House of Randall done something to you as well?!"

Cyrus furrowed his brow. "What do you mean, to me 'as well'? Has the House of Randall done something to you, Miss Katarina?"

So questioned, and having already revealed too much, I disclosed to Cyrus and Maria the events leading up to me requiring bodyguards. I asked them to please try not to mention it to anyone else.

"I see, so that's how it is." With his brow still furrowed, Cyrus nodded.

"It's not as if he's done anything to me yet. This is just in case he does try something. Incidentally, what made you bring up the House of Randall a moment ago, Mr. Cyrus?"

"Ah, right. I was thinking about your former classmate, Fray Randall. Regarding the question of her candidacy for the engagement of Prince Jeord, I can't imagine that she has undertaken that move alone. Though I'm sure it was her family's decision, what I can't figure out is why? Why now—"

Before Cyrus could finish speaking, I leaped up from my chair and cried, "What, really?! Fray's family name is Randall?!"

"You *finally* realized, huh?" Sora gasped from behind me, quietly and with an air of disbelief.

"Wha— Sora, you knew?" I swept around to look at him.

"Wouldn't *anyone* have figured it out after hearing the same name that we heard just a moment ago?" He regarded me with a look of disbelief.

"Ooh... If you knew, then you could have told me." I pouted.

"Today my duty is to be your bodyguard. I am devoting myself to remaining in your shadow. Though if you still didn't realize, I was eventually going to tell you," was Sora's comment.

Seriously? Am I really supposed to believe that letting me make a

fool of myself was a necessary part of being devoted to his bodyguard work? I mean, well... Anyway, I still would have liked him to tell me sooner.

"So, Miss Katarina, is it safe to say that your former schoolmate, Fray Randall, and Marquess Randall, who has prompted such caution from your father, are blood relations?" asked Cyrus, once Sora and I had concluded our exchange.

"I have never asked Fray about her family, but it is not as if someone outside a noble house can use its name, so I think she is part of his family."

Of course, adopted children and other arrangements were quite common in noble society, so I could not say for certain whether or not they were related by blood. What was for certain was that she belonged to Marquess Randall's family.

"So Fray Randall has been introduced as Prince Jeord's fiancée, and Marquess Randall is engaging in unwanted meddling in the affairs of the House of Claes. These two facts must be connected," muttered Cyrus.

"Yes, they must be," I belatedly agreed. It would have been far more surprising if they weren't related. Only a few days ago, Fray, who looked up to Larna, had spoken of wanting to work hard at the Ministry, with her eyes sparkling. Why would she, without warning, claim to be a candidate for engagement to Prince Jeord? I felt terribly uneasy. I wondered if Fray was all right.

Marquess Randall: a man my father—who is rumored to be very formidable when not in front of his family—considers dangerous.

"Um, Mr. Cyrus. I'm starting to feel very concerned for Fray's safety. It seems like Marquess Randall is a dangerous man."

"Really? I know nothing about him, but considering what you told me about your schoolmate yesterday, along with what we know of the present circumstances, it sounds like that might be the case."

In any case, I'm worried about Fray. If only she had a fiancé who could protect her, like Lady Susanna has. But I haven't heard about Fray having a fiancé. I mean, if she's claiming to be a candidate for engagement to Prince Jeord, then she can't already have one.

Fray is currently living in the student dormitories at the Academy of Magic as a second-year student. The academy isn't on break at the moment, so she must still be going to class, as usual. And the Magical Ministry and the Academy of Magic are on the same grounds.

“Mister Cyrus, I... I think I would like to go and check on Fray. And I would like to hear about this from Fray herself.”

Hearing this, Cyrus looked conflicted. “As your superior at the Ministry, while I can grant you permission to leave for a brief period of time, speaking personally, I cannot bring myself to permit you to go and meet someone from a family that Duke Claes regards with such caution.”

Ooh... I can see where Cyrus is coming from. We just decided that I need protection, so it’s understandable that Cyrus would say that going to Fray, who is related to Marquess Randall, is not a good idea. But still...

“We are talking about my precious schoolmate, who holds me very dear. If she’s in trouble, then I want to do whatever I can for her.”

I thought of Fray, whose eyes had shone so brightly as she spoke about her dreams. My adorable schoolmate, who had told me how much she wanted to work alongside me. I wanted to hear from Fray herself just what had happened to her, and why it had happened.

“I know how you feel, but...” began Cyrus.

“Excuse me, but in that case, shall I go and talk to her? As I am a commoner, I should be in a position to move freely,” interjected Maria, raising her hand.

“Huh, Maria, you want to go?!” I cried in astonishment.

Looking me straight in the eye, Maria nodded firmly. “Fray was my schoolmate too. Having listened to what you had to say, I feel very worried. As Miss Fray does seem very fond of you, Lady Katarina, I wish that you could go, but regardless of Miss Fray’s personal feelings, the House of Randall itself does not think kindly of you. That being the case, I think it would be better for me to go. As I am not bound up in all of this, I think I can proceed without any problems.”

Certainly, Maria is not a noblewoman, but a commoner, and therefore someone wholly unrelated to factional disputes between nobles. However...

“Marquess Randall looks to be a dangerous man, so I would be worried about letting you go on your own, Maria,” I said. Maria had no bodyguard, and though she possessed strong magic, she could only wield Light Magic, which was not an offensive element. Nor did she have a familiar who could fight for her, as I did, so if

anything happened, she would be unable to defend herself.

As if she was aware of all of this herself, a troubled expression came over Maria's face while I spoke.

A moment later, Cyrus opened his mouth, and said, "In that case, I will accompany Miss Maria."

"Huh, Mr. Cyrus? Don't you have work to do?" Though I was pleased by his suggestion, I couldn't help but ask. After all, Cyrus's position as the director of the Ministry's star division, the Magic and Magical Powers Research Department, made him very busy indeed.

"Well, the department seems comparatively quiet today, so it should be all right for me to duck out for a little while. Besides, I'm worried about Miss Maria too." Although he turned just a little bit red after uttering these final words, for Cyrus this was a good effort. Perhaps I should say that he would go to any lengths for the woman he loved.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Cyrus," said Maria, looking at Cyrus with her eyes sparkling. Cyrus himself looked very pleased. As the director of the Magic and Magical Powers Research Department, he possessed very powerful magic himself, and even without that, as the son of a margrave he was an extremely capable young man. If he went with Maria, I would feel very reassured. Now I felt that I could ask Maria to go without reservation.

"If Mr. Cyrus is going with you, then my mind is at ease. Maria, I'm counting on you." Maria nodded firmly in response.

With all of that being decided, Maria and Cyrus returned to their department and announced that they would be leaving the office briefly before heading to the Academy of Magic.

"I really thought that you would insist on going yourself," muttered Sora, once the two of us were alone in the room.

"Wha— Do people really think I'm that much of a blockhead?!" Despite all my efforts, I had recently started to worry that I was becoming more like the villainess from the games. But the next words from Sora told me something very different.

"No, how should I put it? You have a tendency to forget yourself when the people closest to you are in trouble, and put yourself in harm's way. I thought that might be the case this time as well."

These words caused me to remember the one thing I feared besides romance.

"Well... The thing about that is..." At first I tried to find the

right way to avoid the subject, but then I noticed Sora looking at me with concern in his eyes, and I no longer wanted to do that. I opened my mouth to speak again. “The thought of suddenly being parted from someone dear to me really frightens me.”

“Suddenly parted?”

“Yeah. There are times when I feel like I may suddenly find myself unable to see the people dear to me ever again, without even having a chance to say goodbye or thank you. So whenever something happens to someone close to me, I feel anxious.” That fear had first taken root in my heart when I recalled the memories of my past life at the age of eight.

Just like my fear of romance, I had always kept this fear under wraps, but when I was able to acknowledge my fear of romance, I remembered my fear of losing loved ones as well. But my fears were of course just another part of me, so I could not go on ignoring them forever. I had already decided to face them head-on.

“Has that ever happened to you before?” asked Sora, his eyes wide.

“I...guess so. How about you, Sora?” *Though it has not happened in this life—before I knew it, I had already been separated from the people who were dearest to me, without having a chance to say anything to them.*

“I guess so. I feel that way too, sometimes. That I should have spoken to someone more, while I still had the chance.” Sora looked off into the distance with a sorrowful face. All of a sudden, he must have remembered someone to whom he had had to say farewell. I also briefly recalled my family and friends from my past life.

My irritable but still loving mother, my father who doted on me just a bit more than he did with my older brothers, who for their part did not think of me as a girl, treating me instead like a little brother. And of course my best friend, who shared in my hobbies.

Even now, I felt a pain in my chest when I remembered them all. It was painful to know that I could never repay them for everything they gave me, not even a little. This year, I had passed the age I had been when my past life ended. In this life, I wanted to live a long time, to be a grandmother, and pay back the debt I owed to everyone that way.

“Well, now I understand that you sometimes feel anxious and get carried away, but are you telling me that you’ve become able to control those feelings?” asked Sora, coming back to reality and

seeming like his normal self.

"Hmmm. I wouldn't say that I'm able to control them completely, but I just think what a waste it would be if I put myself in danger and caused trouble for everyone else important to me." This was something I had finally come to understand since learning to acknowledge my fears. "Besides that, Sora, when I followed you without thinking during that one mission we went on, I was taken hostage and caused you a lot of trouble. I can't afford to repeat that mistake and inconvenience you again."

Sora's eyes opened wider still. "No, I let my guard down that time as well, so it wasn't only your fault, and, well, I don't really mind if you cause me a little bit of trouble."

"Sora..." I felt deeply touched by my colleague's kindness. "Still, I can't be doing that anymore, so I'll be careful from now on!" I declared, before commencing my work decoding the covenant. Only, I did end up worrying about Fray, and couldn't progress with my work as much as I wanted to.

A while later, while I was still working sluggishly on decoding the covenant, Maria and Cyrus returned. They had Ginger, our junior schoolmate, with them.

"Huh, Ginger, what are you doing here?!" I was confused, wondering why they had brought back Ginger after going to check on Fray.

"Well, we were told that Fray is taking a break from school at the moment. So, thinking that her good friend Ginger might know something, we went and asked her. But in the end, she did not seem to know anything about Fray's circumstances either... She did, however, have something she wanted to ask you about, Lady Katarina, so we had her accompany us back here." That was how Maria explained what had happened.

Fray was "taking a break" from the academy. In other words, she was at home, at Randall Manor. My anxiety immediately grew more intense. For her part, Ginger looked absolutely crestfallen. Although she didn't know what was happening to Fray, there was something she wanted to talk to me about. Could it be something related to the matter at hand?

"Why is Fray taking time off from the academy?" I asked Ginger.

"All I know is that it has something to do with her family. In

fact, the last time I saw her, she suddenly received a call from home, told me 'I'll be back soon,' and I have not seen her since," answered Ginger with a gloomy expression.

"Is that so?" That did sound awfully suspicious. "Now then, Ginger, what did you want to talk to me about?" When I asked Ginger this, she glanced at Maria, Cyrus, and Sora in turn. Most likely, this was something that she did not want anyone besides me to hear.

"Maria, Mr. Cyrus. Could I ask you to please vacate the room for a short while? Sora, as you are my bodyguard for now, could I ask you to wait just outside the room?" I said, looking at each of my colleagues in turn as I checked with them. They all complied.

After saying, "See you once you're done talking," they all exited the room, leaving Ginger and me by ourselves.

"Um, excuse me. That was selfish of me," said Ginger apologetically before bowing her head.

"That's okay. You don't want anyone else to hear what you have to say, do you?"

"That's right... Um, since it's not something to do with me personally, I wonder if it's really all right for me to tell other people about it."

So whatever Ginger wants to tell me, it's not about herself. Considering the flow of the conversation up until now...

"Might this be something to do with Fray?" I asked. Ginger nodded slightly.

"Fray told me this was the first time she had talked to anyone about it...and that it could change people's image of her if they heard about it, asking me to please not share it... So I didn't feel like I could tell just anyone..." This answer was just like Ginger, who was always honest and considerate when it came to her friends. However...

"Is it all right for me to hear about it?" I asked, just to make sure.

Ginger hesitated for a moment. "If it is you, Lady Katarina, I think it would be fine... I think Fray would forgive me too. Fray always said that you are special, and a very important person to her."

"Fray said that?!" To be honest, I was shocked. While I had noticed Ginger becoming more attached to me, I never felt particularly close to Fray. Fray was very accomplished in both

sports and her studies, and ranked high in both magical aptitude and social status. On top of all that, she was a young lady with remarkably good communication skills. So I had never found an opportunity to help her with anything—though she had helped me on many occasions—so I did not understand why she adored me so. I even worried that Fray might simply be under a misapprehension.

But Ginger continued, "Fray told me that something you said allowed her to change. She often reminisced that if it had not been for you, Lady Katarina, the Fray we know today would not exist." From the way she said this, Ginger almost seemed proud of herself.

Come to think of it, I do remember Fray saying something to that effect. Something about the day we first met—though to be honest, I couldn't remember what I said back then. I did manage to remember what Fray was like the first time we met. She was so different back then that I could hardly imagine that she is still the same girl. Her expression was so very gloomy, and the look in her eyes told me that she had given up on everything.

If the girl I met back then really was Fray before she entered the academy, then her life at that time can't have been a very happy one. That was the feeling I had.

I took a deep breath. "In that case, I must respectfully ask you to tell me everything you know about Fray," I declared, looking straight at Ginger.

Ginger slowly nodded. "This is what Fray told me when I asked her about her family," she began. Ginger said that the catalyst for her conversation with Fray had been a letter she received from her own family. Thinking nothing of it at first, she looked over the letter's contents in the student council room, before suddenly becoming angry and tearing up the letter.

When Fray saw this, she asked Ginger what was wrong. As it was just the two of them in the student council room at the time, Ginger told Fray that the letter was from her family, and explained that its contents had angered her.

"In the first place, I am the daughter of a lascivious baron and a lowly servant he had an affair with. Baron Tucker has many such children, and all of them were taken away to live with their mothers. But as my mother passed away soon after giving birth to me, there was no one to take me in. With no alternative, I was raised in a cottage on the grounds of Tucker Manor, some distance from the main house. As the lowly daughter of a servant, my father

mostly left me alone. Until my magical abilities awakened, I had never once met him. A few different servants took turns looking after me instead."

I was dumbstruck. Ginger talked as if this was nothing of importance, but it was a horrible story.

"After my magical abilities awakened when I was twelve years old, I was immediately accepted into the Tucker household, as the first magic user in its history. A man who said he was my father suddenly came to the cottage and took me back to his mansion. His wife and children were jealous of me, which really bothered me."

Magic users were considered precious even among nobles, so I had heard similar stories of children who were initially neglected receiving much warmer treatment from their parents after their abilities awakened. Still, I had never imagined that there was someone so close to me who had experienced that.

"Occasionally I would receive letters from the man who called himself my father. He would write that he expected great things from me, or some such. Reading these would always irritate me, and that day in the student council room, I tore the letter to shreds, as I always did. After I spoke to Fray about it, I asked her about her own family, and what she told me was truly awful."

"Wha— Worse than your circumstances, Ginger?!" I could not help but raise my voice. *What Ginger just told me about her circumstances definitely isn't good, so if Ginger says someone else's family is awful, just how bad is it?!*

Ginger was surprised to see me looking so shocked. "My circumstances were not so awful. On the contrary, I had a good upbringing."

"B-But you were abandoned to live in a cottage and never met your father, right?"

"Yes. So I hardly ever had to deal with anyone else, and enjoyed a free and relaxed upbringing."

I froze up briefly at this response from Ginger. Living a free and relaxed life as an adult was one thing, but for a child, that was *not* "freedom" but abandonment, and not at all a good thing. That was at least how it seemed to me, but considering Ginger's feelings, I was reluctant to say so. I stood there for a while opening and closing my mouth, but could not find anything to say.

Looking at me with my mouth flapping, Ginger started giggling. "Tee hee hee. From an outsider's perspective, I know it might not

sound good. As a matter of fact, having few interactions with other people did have the undesirable effect of leaving me unsure of how to get along with others, and I was entirely isolated until I entered the Academy of Magic." For a moment, Ginger fell silent. "However, once I entered the academy and started to interact with other people, I came to realize something. I had been cherished the whole time."

"Cherished?" I echoed. *Was there really anything in the story I just heard suggesting that she was* cherished*?* I felt like there was probably a question mark hanging over my head again, but Ginger nodded resolutely.

"Yes. Now that I look back on my upbringing, it occurs to me that the baron definitely would not have assigned me individual servants himself. That means all the servants who waited on me in the cottage came in their spare time after work, out of the kindness of their own hearts, just to look after me. Thinking back on those days now, I even had books and soft toys that the baron certainly wouldn't have gone to the trouble of buying for me himself. They weren't in especially good condition, so I think that the servants must have taken toys that the other children had grown tired of and brought them to me. They also occasionally left the sort of sweets children like as snacks for me. I very much doubt that they were instructed to do so, so I think this was also something they provided for me themselves."

Ginger smiled warmly.

"Although I was not blessed with loving parents, I was lucky to have other people around who cared about me. I was the lowly child of a servant, left alone in a cottage away from the main house. It would not have been unusual for a child such as me to be abandoned entirely, but the servants all did their best to create a comfortable environment for me. They gave me tasty food, books to read, and toys to play with. They gave me a proper upbringing."

Upon hearing about it at first, I could only think that Ginger's circumstances sounded terrible, but after hearing Ginger's point of view in more detail, I started to think that it might not have been so terrible after all.

"So, if I manage to get a job at the Magical Ministry, I want to use the money I earn to thank the servants who cared for me in the cottage back then."

When Ginger spoke about those servants, it was with the same

expression anyone else would use to speak about their family. As far as Ginger was concerned, the servants who used their free time to care for her were her real family. With her eyes wistfully half-closed, I was sure Ginger was enjoying memories of that family.

Then a startled look came over Ginger's face. "Excuse me. I have drifted completely away from the matter I wanted to tell you about. What I wanted to talk about is what Fray told me about her family after I told her about mine." As she recalled the more pressing subject, her expression stiffened.

I was also startled, and had to correct my posture. *That's right, it's Fray's family we're worried about.* "Right. Tell me, what is so awful about Fray's family?" *Had Fray perhaps been abandoned, just like Ginger? Were there perhaps days when she didn't get to eat?*

"Fray's family did not treat her like a person."

"Didn't treat her like a person?" This was not the sort of answer I had expected.

"Yes. From a very young age, Fray was told that she was a tool meant to serve the interests of Marquess Randall."

"A tool to serve the interests of Marquess Randall..." Repeating Ginger's words to myself, I couldn't imagine anyone speaking to another person that way, much less to a small child.

"In order to be useful to Marquess Randall, she was to maintain her health, study, and acquire skills. She was raised being told that she was born for that purpose alone."

I stared, aghast.

"She was only served meals sufficient to maintain her health, and never had the chance to eat the kinds of sweets that children enjoy. She was given neither toys nor picture books, but instead made to study relentlessly in order to be useful to the marquess. If she ever did poorly, the marquess would become violent toward her, and she would sometimes have to go without food."

I found myself at a loss for words, and could only gape in silence at Ginger, who was clearly trying hard to control her own anger. As I had been raised by a loving family in this life and my past one, I could not imagine what Fray's childhood had been like. The memory of the day I first met Fray surfaced in the back of my mind. Now I felt I understood why Fray had had that look in her eyes. If she had not given up on everything, she may not have been able to go on living. Even if she found something she wanted to do, she knew it would not be allowed, as her path in life had already

been decided for her.

A memory I thought I had lost returned to me.

"Um, somebody told me that I shouldn't give up, but should keep looking forward. But what am I supposed to do next? Can you tell me?" A girl with a gloomy expression on her face asked me this in desperation. While wondering why she looked so desperate, I gave her the first answer I could think of.

"If you've decided not to give up, and keep looking ahead, I think the next thing to do would be to move forward."

"Move forward?" The girl looked perplexed.

"Yep. Put one foot in front of you like this and step forward," I answered, before taking a big step forward. The girl stood frozen to the spot as she watched my demonstration. *Huh, maybe this isn't the kind of answer she was after.* I had begun to fret when the girl suddenly spoke again.

"Thank you so much," she thanked me for some reason. "I think I would like to take a few steps forward before I start at the academy." There appeared to be a light in the girl's eyes that had not been there a few moments earlier.

"Go for it." After responding cheerfully, the girl turned and started walking, while looking squarely at what lay in front of her. As I watched her stroll away from behind, she somehow looked a bit more confident than she had just a few moments ago.

It could have been that, from that day forward, Fray had decided to no longer give up on life. She left home, came to the academy, and really did the best that she could. After being subjected to violence from a very young age and having no choice but to resign herself to a life where she had to repress her own wishes, just how hard must Fray have fought to become the person she was today?

Just thinking about it made my heart ache. I even felt tears start to well up in my eyes.

Seeing this, Ginger spoke up with concern in her voice. "Lady Katarina?"

"I'm okay. Sorry. I was just thinking that Fray really must have fought hard to get where she is today, and I felt a pain in my chest."

Ginger grimaced, as if reflecting on something painful herself, before finally saying, "Yes. Fray is an amazing person."

Fray was not only a beauty, but accomplished in both her studies and sports, and she also held a high rank in society. She even had exceptional communication skills. Anyone would have considered this young noblewoman to simply be blessed. That was how I had thought about her. I was sure that everyone else regarded her in the same way. But I was wrong.

While growing up in a horrific environment, with her path in life set for her and her own emotions repressed, Fray had managed to keep looking forward, even as she struggled. She was in fact an amazing person, who had contended with so much. And now she had most likely been forced into another unpleasant situation.

"Ginger, Fray has supposedly started to introduce herself as a candidate for engagement to Prince Jeord." When I disclosed this, Ginger opened her eyes wide in surprise. It appeared that this was not yet widely known, so I suppose I should not have been surprised that Ginger had not yet heard about it.

"What, no way! Fray told me many times that she had no interest in getting married, and that her goal was to work at the Magical Ministry! Besides, Fray looks up to you, Lady Katarina. There's no way that she would stoop so low as to steal your fiancé!" Ginger almost screamed this objection.

I had thought exactly the same thing. After all, Fray had just recently told me, with her eyes sparkling, that her dream was to work at the Magical Ministry.

"When I first heard about it, I also thought it was strange. I mean, it was only the other day that she talked about wanting to work at the Magical Ministry, but... Ginger, now that you've told me about Fray's family situation, I feel I can almost say this for certain. Fray is not claiming to be a candidate for engagement to Prince Jeord of her own free will. I'm sure that Marquess Randall has forced her to do it."

"And do you think that she's being kept against her will at Randall Manor?"

"I think that's most likely the case."

Ginger's expression contorted with worry, and after a moment she responded, "Do you think Fray is all right?"

"If the marquess is intending to present her publicly as a prince's fiancée, there's no way he'd harm her." *Or so I want to believe.* "Ginger, I won't speak about Fray's personal situation in too much detail, but is it all right for me to tell others that she's in

trouble? A case like this is too much for me to handle on my own, so I'll have to ask other people for help."

Ginger nodded firmly in response to my question. She then added, with an earnest look in her eyes, "I may have little in the way of social standing or magic, but...if there's something I can do for Fray, please let me help."

Gathering how strongly she felt, I, too, nodded firmly. "Got it."

After our private conversation, Ginger and I called Cyrus, Maria, and Sora back into the room. I explained that there was a high probability that what was happening was not in accordance with Fray's wishes, but was instead the result of Marquess Randall's selfish actions. I also explained that Fray was probably being held captive in her father's house to further his goals.

"I see. That being the case, what are we to do next?" asked Cyrus, once I was finished explaining.

I spoke up. "First of all, we must confirm that Fray has not been harmed. At present, it would not do for me to go by myself, so I think I will discuss this with some friends of mine."

"Good. Looks like even you've learned to think a little. My mind is at ease," replied Cyrus, looking relieved. I reflected on the fact that everyone seemed to think of me as thoughtless and reckless.

"Well then, as I would like to go and discuss this matter just as soon as I get in touch with my friends, I am thinking of going to ask my department's deputy head for permission to leave early today. Would that be all right?" Since I was employed by the Magical Tool Laboratory, typically I would need to get permission from a direct superior—either Larna or Raphael—in order to leave work early. As this was an entirely private matter, I was slightly worried.

"As your only remaining task for the day is to decode your covenant, I don't see any problem with that, Miss Katarina. Given the circumstances, I will convey your wishes to Wolt myself, so feel free to go and see your friends as soon as you're able to get in touch," offered Cyrus. I decided to take him up on his offer. And so I immediately went to send an emergency message to my friends.

While I waited for my friends to contact me, I tried to concentrate on decoding the covenant, fidgeting all the while.

Mary was the first to respond to my message. To my surprise, she came immediately in person to the Ministry, explaining that she was already at home when my message came and had no plans for

the rest of the day.

"A request from you, Lady Katarina, ought to be prioritized over everything else," declared Mary, with an air of pride.

So you really didn't *have any other plans? You* are *actually free?*

"Now then, regarding the matter of our consultation. As I was not sure whether this room would be suitable, I booked us another one."

This was just what I would have expected from Mary Hunt, belle of high society, a representative of capable women everywhere. That she had ensured we would have a room where we could all meet as soon as she arrived at the Ministry showed just how thorough she was.

I immediately put down my work, heading to the room Mary had booked for us with Ginger and my bodyguard, Sora. We were quickly joined by Maria, who was also worried about Fray.

We soon arrived at the room, which was furnished in the style of a meeting room, and could be booked by Ministry employees, as well as other people of appropriate standing. The moment everyone was seated, Mary started talking.

"Now then, concerning Fray, about whom Lady Katarina has said she is worried—"

In the letter I sent to each of my friends, all I wrote was "If you know anything about Fray, please tell me." My thinking had been that if I had been able to learn anything from my friends that way, then I could meet with them to discuss the matter further.

"At present, she is reportedly claiming to be a candidate for engagement to Prince Jeord, is she not?" continued Mary.

"You knew too, Mary? When did you hear about that?"

"I happened to overhear it at a tea party a few days ago. Only, as I simply could not imagine someone like Fray doing such a thing, I have been working to gather more detailed information. I was still pursuing that end when I received your message, Lady Katarina. I surmised that you must have learned of the same news, and so I hurried here to meet you."

"Is that so? Thanks, Mary. Have you already managed to gather some more details about Fray?"

"Let me see. For one thing, although I had heard that Fray Randall has claimed to be a candidate for engagement to Prince Jeord, in actuality, this is not a claim that Fray has made herself. It would appear that Marquess Randall has been declaring her

candidacy while attending various social gatherings."

"So...it's just as I suspected." My theory about Fray having been coerced by Marquess Randall against her will to serve as a prospective fiancée for Jeord was strengthened even further.

"Excuse me, but why would Marquess Randall go around claiming that? I mean, there's not a single person in society who does not know that Lady Katarina is Prince Jeord's fiancée." Ginger somewhat timidly raised this question.

Mary answered. "I suppose that is true. I did wonder about that very thing myself. After all, saying such a thing at this late stage could even be seen as an affront to Duke Claes's family."

I guess it is. In this aristocratic society, where strategic marriages were the norm—although the number of people marrying for love was starting to increase—engagements and marriages served a profound purpose in binding families together. Quibbling over an established engagement could be construed as picking a fight with the families involved.

Marquess Randall seemed to have a fair amount of power, but the rank of House Claes's peerage was higher, and I had heard that my father was quite formidable outside the home, so I did not think he would take this lying down.

"Because of this, it seems that Marquess Randall began by spreading the rumor that you have no intention of going through with your marriage to Prince Jeord."

"Huh, he said that?!"

"Yes. He also said that you only joined the Magical Ministry in order to avoid marriage."

Ugh. That was certainly the case at first. I had neither the confidence nor the resolve to go through with my marriage and join the royal family at the time. So I must acknowledge that there is truth in that accusation.

I floundered for words. "The thing about that is..."

"He went on to say that you came to realize how much you enjoy your work at the Magical Ministry, and wished to devote your life to working here, rather than become the prince's wife. He then asserted that you have come to be regarded as exceedingly capable at the Ministry, and that they cannot stand to lose you."

Ugh. As of late, I certainly have managed to discover enjoyment in my work, but really, what is this? Can Marquess Randall read my mind? I've never even met the man. The part about me being

"exceedingly capable" is, however, completely made up. Still, it isn't as if he has besmirched my name, so maybe my father wouldn't get angry about that. On the contrary, technically Marquess Randall has even praised me, and much of the rumor he spread is true.

"And so, Lady Katarina, the marquess argued that if that is your intention, then why should Prince Jeord not take his daughter for his fiancée? From that point on, he has maintained that Fray is a candidate for engagement to the prince."

What can I say to that? There's a lot of truth in what he says. Some people may well be convinced by it. In all honesty, if I was asked to marry Jeord at this very moment, I don't think I would have an answer right away. But I finally decided that I would face the feelings Jeord has for me...

What father had once said to me, "You may lose that feeling before you even know you have it," was starting to take on a new sense of reality.

"Well, for the time being, let us put aside the question of whether or not Prince Jeord and Lady Katarina will call off their engagement. We still cannot ignore the fact that Fray has been presented as a new candidate against her will," declared Mary.

Wha— So the rumors about my engagement to Jeord being called off aren't a cause for concern?! Although Mary had considered all kinds of facets of the situation, she let this question pass by almost *too* casually. Still, I decided to follow her example and let it pass by as well. *Is this really okay?*

"Moving on, do we know if Fray is at the academy right now?" asked Mary.

Ginger answered "She's not. After a message came from her family a few days ago, she went home and has not been back since."

"Is that right? That is at odds with the rumors circulating within noble society. Marquess Randall has said that the reason Fray has not personally announced her candidacy for engagement to Prince Jeord is that she is too busy with her studies and her student council duties." Mary knitted her brow before continuing. "It could be that Fray is being held captive at Randall Manor for not complying with Marquess Randall's plans."

Upon hearing this, I felt a chill go up my spine. When I was told what sort of person Marquess Randall was, and about Fray's upbringing, the thought had crossed my mind, but hearing someone

else suggest it made the possibility seem all the more real.

"Fray...might be being held captive... Shouldn't we go and save her right now?" I stood up from my chair, but Mary shook her head.

"Lady Katarina, if we march over to Randall Manor right now, we will only be turned away, with no chance of seeing Fray."

"But Fray might be in danger... What can we do?" *She might be suffering more senseless violence as we speak, and if that is allowed to carry on...* As I began to imagine the worst, I felt that I could not simply sit and wait a moment longer.

"Lady Katarina, please be calm. Marquess Randall is trying to prop up Fray as Prince Jeord's new fiancée. After putting his daughter in that position, he cannot afford to harm her. Moreover, she is only taking a break from the academy, and will have to return at some point, so I am sure he will not do anything too extreme."

After this persuasive argument from Mary, I paused before reluctantly agreeing "Y-You're right," then sighed and settled back down in my chair. *I shouldn't be doing this so soon after deciding to break my habit of rushing into things without thinking, should I?*

While I reflected on my behavior, Mary, sitting beside me, continued speaking in a slightly more cheerful tone of voice. "However, I am amazed to think that Fray, that doll princess, ever found the courage to stand up to the marquess."

"Doll princess?" I repeated, as I had not heard the phrase before.

Mary explained "That is what people used to call Fray Randall behind her back, before she entered the academy. Because of the hollow look she always had in her eyes, and how fake her smile looked, someone started calling her that."

"I-I didn't know she had such a nickname." Although it was difficult to imagine given what Fray was like today, when I recalled what Fray was like when I first met her, I supposed that she might have looked that way.

"Not only Fray, but everyone else in the Randall family, with the exception of Lady Susanna, his legitimate daughter, gives off much the same expression. It would seem that Marquess Randall's treatment of his family is just that severe." I could detect a hint of anger in the final words that Mary spoke.

Mary was probably aware of just how horrendous Marquess Randall's treatment of his family was. Even so, she could not speak

against someone with as much influence as the marquess.

"Um, just what kind of person is Marquess Randall?" I inquired of Mary. I wanted to know what kind of position the marquess occupied in noble society.

"Let me see. Well, in any event, he seems to have a strong desire to acquire more power. He has the air of someone who judges people based on whether he thinks he can exploit them. I have only exchanged the barest of pleasantries with him, but in those brief moments I could sense that my worth was being weighed, which was not a good feeling. But the fact remains that he is a powerful figure in society, so I would suppose that those around him are reluctant to enter into conflict with him."

It seemed that even Mary considered the marquess to be a troublesome individual. While I was starting to consider just how we were going to save Fray from the clutches of such a man, a knock came at the door. It was followed by the sound of a familiar voice.

"Excuse me, may I enter?"

Silence reigned for a beat. "What are you doing here so soon...? Come on in." After muttering something to herself quietly, Mary, who had booked the room in the first place, granted our visitor permission to enter.

"Big sister, I thought I'd find you here."

"Lady Katarina."

With these greetings, my adoptive brother Keith and my friend Sophia entered the room. They told me that they were here to see me, and had asked another employee where they could find me before coming to this room.

"Keith, what about your work?" I was sure that Keith had work that day. Though I had tried to contact him, all I had hoped for was to talk to him once I got home. I did not expect him to come all the way to the Magical Ministry.

"I was working at home today, so there was some flexibility."

"Really? Still, this could have waited until I got home." Although doing that would not have been practical with everyone else, Keith and I lived in the same house.

"Well, when I read your letter I was worried you might do something reckless, and didn't feel like I could focus on my work, so I decided to come and hear what you had to say first."

As expected of my brother, who had been picking up after me

for over ten years, he understood my behavior very well. After all, if I had not stopped to accept Mary's input on this occasion, and consider a number of different viewpoints, then I might well have marched over to Randall Manor already.

"Well, you don't have to worry this time. You already warned me about Marquess Randall, and I know I mustn't cause trouble for Sora, my bodyguard."

After I said this, Keith responded, "That's good to hear," sounding relieved. He then got a wistful look in his eyes, and said, "My big sister has finally grown up." His expression was almost like that of a mother looking at her very young child.

It was because of his habit to say such things, and make such expressions, that I could not help but feel like calling Keith "mom." *Well, I guess I have caused him as much trouble as I once caused my mom. Sorry mo— I mean, Keith.*

"I was also at home when I received your message. As my older brother was at work, I was unable to get in contact with him, but I felt restless just sitting at home, and before I knew it I was on my way here," reported Sophia, a worried expression on her face. Though it had not been my intention, it looked like I had caused everyone to worry. Once again, I was forced to reflect on my typical behavior.

After a moment, I asked Keith and Sophia what they knew about Fray and Marquess Randall, but they had no new information. As a matter of fact, Mary still seemed to know more than anyone else in the room.

Keith did not seem to know anything about Marquess Randall beyond what we had talked about previously. However, it turned out that he had been aware of Fray's situation, and had deliberately avoided talking to me about it.

"Why didn't you tell me straight away?" I asked Keith.

With a sigh, Keith replied, "What I'd heard was still uncertain, and I didn't want you to do anything reckless until we knew more, big sister." To be fair, I had been about to do something reckless just a short while earlier—as soon as I learned about her situation, in fact—so I could only hold my tongue and hang my head.

Noting my chagrin, Mary spoke up on my behalf. "That being said, Lady Katarina was so terribly shaken *because* the news was sudden, so I think it would have been better to give her at least some amount of explanation from the beginning."

“I guess that’s true. Sorry, big sister. I promise I’ll tell you everything next time,” Keith apologized after thinking for a moment.

“I’ll be more careful in the future too, and stop to think before doing anything dangerous,” I promised.

“However, just what is Marquess Randall planning on doing? Is he hoping to create a new faction in support of Prince Jeord, putting himself at its center? Right now, Prince Jeffrey’s faction is still very much at the head of the pack, so is such a thing even possible?” mused Keith, tilting his head in contemplation.

“Though I cannot discount the possibility that he is planning on switching over from Prince Jeffrey’s faction, perhaps he is only seeking to keep Prince Jeord close at hand, as insurance? He may think that Prince Jeord will be easier for him to handle.”

“Keeping Prince Jeord as insurance, you say? I don’t think he’ll find him so easy to control.”

“Marquess Randall and his allies probably don’t know Prince Jeord or the members of the other factions too well. Prince Jeord himself probably cannot be bothered with all that infighting, so perhaps he has resorted to feigning friendliness around anyone involved in it.”

“Ah, you may be right.” I was shocked by Mary and Keith’s accurate suppositions about—or perhaps I should say awareness of—Jeord’s character. In the game, he was in fact shown to have a sinister side. To be honest, I did not think Jeord was likely to quietly do someone else’s bidding either.

“However, if Marquess Randall is keeping Fray confined within his house, there is a high probability that he has made some attempt to get closer to Prince Jeord as well. Considering that, it could be that on this occasion, Prince Jeord knows more than we do. Lady Katarina, did you send Prince Jeord a letter as well?” asked Mary.

“Ah, yeah. The same note I sent everyone else,” I replied. It was at that moment that another knock came at the door.

“My, would the phrase ‘speak of the devil’ be appropriate? Please, come in.” Mary gave the person at the door permission to enter, but we were surprised by who it was that appeared.

“Huh, Prince Alan?”

It was Alan, Jeord’s twin brother and Mary’s fiancé. Since Alan had come, I thought Jeord may have come too, but casting my gaze

around Alan, I could not see Jeord anywhere.

"Oh, are you here by yourself?" It was extremely rare for Alan to come alone like this.

"Yeah," replied Alan, frowning slightly. I felt a sense of unease, which I couldn't quite put my finger on.

"Has something happened to Prince Jeord?" asked Mary, with a serious expression on her face.

"Jeord isn't really free to move around much at the moment," was Alan's unexpected reply.

"Prince Jeord 'isn't really free' at the moment? Is he all right? Is something wrong with him?" Although Prince Jeord seemed invincible, he had a surprising habit of pushing himself too far. As a result, he often looked tired, but had he finally made himself ill? I was worried.

But Alan shook his head. "There's nothing wrong with Jeord himself. Never better, in fact. But there are some troublesome people adhering closely to him."

"Troublesome people?" I repeated, tilting my head.

Mary, sitting next to me, blinked before asking, "Might these people be somehow related to Marquess Randall?"

"Yeah, I guess you guys already know what's going on. When I got that letter from Katarina, I thought that might be the case."

"No, I would not quite say that we know what is going on. All we have managed to gather are rumors circulating throughout society, so we do not yet know anything of the truth. We were all just in the process of sharing what information we do have. Prince Alan, could I ask you to please tell us what you know about Prince Jeord's circumstances?" asked Mary, her expression still deadly serious.

Alan nodded firmly. "Yeah. After all, that's why I decided to come here," he agreed, before going on to tell us about Jeord's situation of late.

Chapter 4: Jeord Stuart's Trying Times

I, Jeord Stuart, have found my days to be unpleasant of late. A few days prior, together with Katarina, I helped harvest the crops from her vegetable plot at the academy. The sight of Katarina enjoying herself, frolicking in the field, was so adorable that I felt very happy myself... But afterward, upon returning to the castle, I found myself surrounded by some odious people, and my mood declined almost immediately.

"Prince Jeord, why not take a short rest? Shall I make you some tea?" offered a grinning servant.

"No, no need for that yet. Thank you for your consideration," I replied, forcing a smile of my own.

"I see. Very well, when you wish to rest, please inform me." The servant returned to his post by the wall, and I sighed internally at the sight of him. This man, or rather, the many servants who were posted around me recently were the reason for my bad mood.

All of these servants had been engaged by the palace at Marquess Randall's recommendation, and each and every one was still clearly under his influence. How could I relax, or even breathe, with people like that around me at all times?

It had been about one month prior that Marquess Randall had begun his surveillance of me. Well, no, he had been in the habit of coming to talk to me about one thing or another for a long time now.

With his insatiable lust for power, Marquess Randall was in the habit of cozying up to the royal family whenever he had the chance. And not only to me—he had often spoken to Alan as well. The only members of our family with whom he did not relish the chance to speak belonged to the faction supporting the opposing prince in contest for the throne, Ian. With that group, Marquess Randall exchanged only the most minimal of pleasantries. On top of that, Ian was an intensely honest and just man, so he did not seem to look kindly upon the power-hungry marquess, who so obviously changed his demeanor to appeal to different people. As a result, the

two could hardly be more estranged.

However, even Jeffrey, the very man whom the faction said to be controlled by Marquess Randall sought to elevate to the throne, did not give much indication of wanting to do the marquess's bidding.

Though I did not know how he had dealt with the marquess as a child, these days Jeffrey sometimes even seemed to treat him with a hint of disdain. This he had in common with his fiancée Susanna, who also happened to be the marquess's own daughter.

Susanna Randall was the marquess's daughter by his late first wife, and was born with strong magical aptitude. I had heard it rumored that as soon as she became an adult, she left her father's household to live apart from him.

Furthermore, it was rumored that Marquess Randall had grown irritated with Jeffrey and Susanna, who would not do as they were told. In recent years, it seemed that his impatience with the couple's selfish refusal to tie the knot had reached its limit. And now I had become aware that he had acquired a new target to serve as a pawn in his bid for power, cozying up to me instead.

Though I found this to be quite irritating, he had not gone this far until recently, so I had casually brushed off his intrusions in the past... But for some reason, after Katarina started working at the Magical Ministry, he suddenly began spreading the rumor that she would never marry me at this rate, and announced that he would be putting his own daughter forward as a candidate to marry me instead. To make matters worse, he referred to the castle a number of new servants, and tried to use his influence to have my previous servants driven out of the castle.

At first, in order to better anticipate my opponent's next move, I had concentrated on surveillance myself, but I had grown so irritated by these new servants that I was nearing my own limit. It was at that point that I started considering how to go about eliminating the marquess.

Then, late one night, Jeffrey suddenly appeared in my bedroom.

"Good evening, my darling broth—hold on, why the clenched fists?"

"I was preparing myself to expel a suspicious person who illegally infiltrated my bedroom in the middle of the night." Roused from my sleep by a sudden presence, I had balled my hands into

fists. Now I forced a smile upon my face.

"No, no, look closely, little brother. It's your beloved big brother. Not anyone suspicious."

"Wrong. In the first place, I have no beloved big brother."

"How can you say such a thing, little brother? You'll make your big brother cry."

"Might I ask you to leave now?" I eventually said, fed up with Jeffrey's feigned sobbing.

Jeffrey then abruptly raised his head, his expression suddenly serious. "I have come to speak to you about a matter of some secrecy and importance."

Well, he did sneak in this late at night. I did think there must be some reason, but...

"In that case, please tell me without delay." I offered Jeffrey one of the chairs standing in my room. Once we had both sat down facing each other, Jeffrey began to speak.

"It looks like the leader of the faction supporting me, Marquess Randall, has been meddling in your affairs of late... Sorry about that."

Given recent events, I did think that this would be the subject of our conversation. "If that is how you feel, then please do something on your end to stop him, elder brother Jeffrey. It has been so vexing that I am at my limit." Although I more or less understood the circumstances surrounding this factional conflict, I was tired of being played for a fool by my always aloof, composed elder brother, so I deliberately injected some sarcasm into my tone.

"Yeah. The way that man cozies up to us really is vexing, isn't it? You've just been thinking that you've about reached your limit and that it's time to eliminate him, right?"

Hesitantly, I responded, "You are exactly right. You do not mind if I eliminate him, do you?"

"Well... About that, could I get you to wait a little bit longer?"

I opened my eyes wide in disbelief at this answer. "May I ask why?! Are you planning on pushing Marquess Randall onto me?"

"Of course not. I wouldn't think of forcing that worthless man onto my precious little brother. I simply want to let him flounder for a while and see what happens."

Though I was able to breathe a sigh of relief after hearing that Jeffrey did not plan on foisting Marquess Randall onto me, the last words he spoke left me puzzled.

“Let him flounder and see what happens, you say? Does this mean that Marquess Randall is planning on doing something to you, elder brother Jeffrey?”

Jeffrey shook his head in response. “No, that’s not it. And for the sake of argument, even if he were, I have no intention of letting someone like that do as he pleases with me.”

“For what purpose, then?”

Jeffrey paused for a moment before answering my question. “You have an understanding of the events that took place within the royal family before our father the current king’s ascension to the throne was decided, don’t you, Jeord?”

The previous king, who was survived by many children, had passed away before naming his successor. As a result, the palace descended into violent chaos surrounding his succession. Some even died, and Dark Magic, which had long been prohibited, was brought back into our world. These events were the greatest stain on the recent history of the royal family of Sorcié.

“Yes, I do.”

“The members of the royal family who instigated that violence, along with the collaborators who backed them, were all exiled from our kingdom. Marquess Randall’s name was on that list of collaborators. But though it appeared that he lent support to the instigators, in the end there was no definitive evidence, and the crimes he was accused of were not deemed to be as serious as those of others, so he was left alone at the time. There were just too many other offenders who took priority, so he was supposed to be dealt with later.”

I silently reflected on this information. “Is that so?” *I didn’t know that.*

“Subsequently, once everyone else within our family who had committed crimes against Sorcié had more or less been dealt with, it was finally time for the investigation into Marquess Randall’s involvement to begin. But as so much time had already passed, nothing conclusive was found, so he has simply been kept under surveillance ever since,” Jeffrey explained indifferently.

“I had no idea that Marquess Randall was such a troublesome individual. However, is it not dangerous for someone who may yet be prosecuted for crimes against our kingdom to remain at the head of your faction, elder brother Jeffrey?”

“Things are going just fine. I’ve allowed him to think that I’m

just another one of his pawns, and I've taken measures to ensure that I won't suffer any backlash when he's finally taken down."

"Indeed? That is good to hear. But I must say, although it seems a little late to mention this now, if you have allowed the marquess to remain at the head of your faction, knowing him to be a criminal, then you cannot have any intention of becoming our next king." When I gave voice to the vague doubts I had been having, Jeffrey, like a child having one of his pranks exposed, shrugged and pulled a mischievous face.

"Ah, so you've realized, Jeord?"

"I should think that anyone would suspect as much, considering that you still have not married, and, moreover, have kept many people in your faction whom I can only describe as lacking integrity. If you were an incompetent man, elder brother Jeffrey, that would be one thing—but as you are not, I have always suspected something was amiss."

Upon hearing this, Jeffrey's face lit up. "I see, I see, my little brother thinks I am an outstanding talent. I'm so happy to hear that."

I paused. "I never said 'outstanding.' More to the point, please continue." Although in reality I *did* think he was outstanding, I did not wish to say so and further excite my brother. Also, I simply felt bashful.

"Well, the throne means nothing to me. My only desire is to see the people I care about live happily, without hardship, you see?" Although his tone of voice was jocular, the look on his face was serious, so I actually did believe that he was speaking from the heart. "So I am going to concentrate on making sure that no strange people come to meddle in my darling brother's affairs any longer."

So *this* was why Jeffrey's faction had so many disagreeable members. The thought of having been protected by my brother all this time, without even knowing about it, left me with a strange feeling of unease.

Perhaps Jeffrey sensed how I was feeling, as the corners of his mouth suddenly turned up in a grin. Then he started speaking once again. "Now then, let's get back to our main topic, that of Marquess Randall. I've started to suspect that some fairly troublesome people might be working with him behind the scenes."

"Troublesome people?"

"Yeah. In the first place, Marquess Randall is not an especially

smart man. Although he may excel at dominating other people emotionally, I don't think he is quite crafty enough to have disposed of the evidence against him so efficiently. Although I once thought he was simply exceptionally lucky, benefiting from coincidence, in recent years, I have heard it suggested that someone far more shrewd might be supporting him from the shadows. I have looked into it."

"And was there such a person behind him after all?"

"Although I can't yet be certain, I think there almost has to be." Jeffrey frowned. "The same person probably helped House Dieke research Dark Magic, and we both know how that turned out. Once House Dieke's crimes came to light and they received their judgment, I suspect this shadowy figure started their research anew somewhere else. The woman known as Sarah is probably one of their underlings."

Sarah was the woman who was long subjected to Dark Magic experiments underneath Dieke Manor, and vanished after that family's crimes had been exposed. In the aftermath of these revelations, this woman, shrouded in mystery though she was, was found to have participated in a number of incidents involving Dark Magic, most likely under someone else's command.

"Have you really managed to learn this much?" I asked, amazed by Jeffrey's ability to gather information.

"No, I haven't verified this either. This is nothing more than conjecture based on the various pieces of information I have gathered. But I don't think I'm likely to be too far off the mark."

I thought to myself that, if this outstanding brother of mine said so, it was very likely to be the case. Because the woman known as Sarah had been involved in so many incidents that also involved Katarina, I had conducted my own independent investigations, but had failed to uncover a single lead. I was once again forced to marvel at Jeffrey's capabilities.

"Moving on, although this, too, is only conjecture, I think that the one behind Marquess Randall must be someone of fairly high social standing. Perhaps they were even involved in the commotion surrounding the royal succession."

"Did you not just say that, besides Marquess Randall, everyone who committed a crime was sent into exile?"

"Well, naturally they didn't manage to exile every single one. But anyone left who was suspected of wrongdoing, like Marquess

Randall, is still being monitored. So I think there must be someone left among the instigators who was never suspected, and has continued to work behind the scenes."

"However, given it must be someone of high social rank, then we are dealing with at least a marquess, perhaps even a duke. The only count with any power to speak of is Count Ascart, so does that not considerably narrow down our list of suspects?"

"That's not necessarily true. We can't discount the possibility that they belong to the royal family."

This answer was so unexpected that I opened my eyes wide in shock. "When one speaks of the royal family, is there anyone left besides the dowager queen, our immediate family, and our uncle, who never leaves his home, which is separated from the castle? Are you trying to say that one of these people is the mastermind behind these crimes?" Excluding our immediate family only left two people.

"I see your point. *Ostensibly*, that is everyone in the royal family."

"Huh?!" This time, I could not help but cry out in shock. "What are you trying to say? I was told that every other member of the royal family either died or was exiled. Was that not correct?"

"That is the official position taken by our family in order to avoid conflict when the time comes for the next royal succession. But it would have been inhumane to exile people who hadn't committed any crime, after all," said Jeffrey, as if this revelation was of no great importance.

"Is this really something I should be hearing about?" I asked, suddenly feeling like burying my face in my hands.

"Sure, I obtained His Majesty's permission, so there shouldn't be a problem," answered Jeffrey casually.

Already at my wits' end, I supported my head with one hand as I pressed him further. "In that case...please tell me, what exactly were the unofficial circumstances?"

"The members of the royal family who were suspected but not exiled signed an oath to never call themselves royalty again, and after changing their names and their appearances, started lives under new identities. Though they are required to make regular reports, for the most part they have been allowed to live out their lives however they please."

"In other words, you are saying that one such fallen royal may

be working with Marquess Randall behind the scenes?"

"That's one possibility, at least."

"Are these people not under surveillance, like Marquess Randall?"

"Well, there are quite a few of them. More than we can handle. When our current predicament came to light, I tried investigating them, but did not find any of them to be suspicious. In the first place, our family did its best to ensure that only those who had not committed any obvious crimes remained, so it's difficult to call any of them suspicious. Part of me wants to believe that everyone left in our family is innocent. However, I can't claim to understand how those who irrationally feel aggrieved by what happened in the contest for the throne really think, deep down."

"So, despite your best efforts, for the time being, although there appears to be someone behind the scenes, we cannot identify them?" I asked, still clutching my head with one hand.

"Precisely," Jeffrey confirmed with a nod.

"So that is why you so brazenly allowed Marquess Randall to remain at large for the time being? You were hoping to elicit information about the one behind him, who is really in control?" I deduced, summing up our conversation up to that point.

For some reason, Jeffrey's eyes shone. "That's my little brother! You catch on quickly. You're a genius." He even started clapping.

I thought to myself that this was no time for him to be playing the fool. I was starting to feel slightly fed up with his antics. Somehow, I found myself staring off into the distance. "I understand the situation. For the sake of our kingdom's future, we have no choice but to cooperate. But please, tell me how long this must go on. With Marquess Randall's underlings surrounding me, as they are at the moment, I cannot even go to see Katarina, can I?" When I said this, a slightly more serious expression came over Jeffrey's face.

"Now, about Lady Katarina. I believe I said that I think that the one manipulating Marquess Randall was probably the same person using Sarah for their own ends. In other words—"

"That person knows that Katarina can use Dark Magic!" I cried, leaning forward in my chair without thinking. Why had I not realized as much as soon as Jeffrey had mentioned that? Perhaps I had simply been overwhelmed by the magnitude of information Jeffrey had given me.

"That's right. But for the time being, Marquess Randall has shown no signs of doing anything about Lady Katarina, so he probably hasn't been informed of that fact. If he knew the truth about Katarina, I think he would try to eliminate her."

The word "eliminate" in conjunction with Katarina's name sent a chill down my spine.

I clenched my fists again as I quietly struggled to contain myself. "I will never let that happen," I muttered.

Fixing me with a steady gaze, Jeffrey declared, "I understand what it's like to want to protect those dear to you. But if you become overly emotional as a result, you will only put your foot in it. The riskier a situation is, the more important it is to keep a cool head."

These words startled me. I recalled the occasion when, during the International Assembly, I forgot myself in the midst of my anger and went berserk.

That's right. Though I did reflect on my actions afterward, if Katarina is in trouble, I can't stop my blood from boiling, or my better judgment failing. I need to calm down, otherwise I won't be able to do what is required to protect Katarina. I slowed my breathing and managed to calm myself down.

"Good. That's what you need to do. Sometimes you can't help but get angry, but you always need to try and calm yourself down. Though I'm sure you know this, Jeord, she does have a Dark Familiar lurking inside her, and has even obtained that covenant. She may be considered as exceptional as that Wielder of Light, Maria Campbell. No, she is perhaps an even rarer talent."

Jeffrey was entirely right. Thanks to that peculiar dog that the woman known as Sarah created, and the book she had obtained—the covenant, or whatever it was called—together with Maria Campbell, Katarina had truly become someone rare and special. Not that Katarina had realized that fact herself. She still carried herself in more or less the same way.

"Only, Katarina's powers seem less defined than Maria's, and could even be something of a double-edged sword. As long as she's acting according to her own judgment, I wouldn't worry, but if she decides to follow someone else, or is simply deceived, then she could become a fearsome weapon."

What Jeffrey described was something I had thought about myself. Each time we learned of a new ability that familiar of hers

possessed, and saw just how formidable it was, I felt a sudden chill.

"I know that Lady Katarina is the most precious person in the world to you, Jeord. I'm fond of her too. So I want her to have a happy life. But if she falls into the hands of some malevolent individual, and is consumed by Dark Magic, she may cease to be the Katarina you know and love. If that were to happen, I would not be able to let her go unchecked," declared Jeffrey, finally in a serious tone of voice.

I immediately responded, "I will never let such a thing happen. I *will* protect Katarina."

Jeffrey seemed to ruminate for a moment. "I thought you might say that. In order to do that, I need you to keep your cool. I need your cooperation until I can find someone who might be able to lead us to the one behind Marquess Randall. After all, that will surely help us protect Lady Katarina as well."

“Do you think the person behind Marquess Randall is targeting Katarina?” I asked Jeffrey.

“I don’t know. All I know is the fact that this person has not done anything significant—despite knowing the truth about Lady Katarina and having made contact with her via Sarah on several occasions—means that there must be some consideration staying their hand. But it’s only a matter of time. I can’t imagine that they will overlook her indefinitely.”

“In that case, I will simply have to eliminate them along with the marquess. I will not allow anyone to lay a finger on those who are dear to me,” I declared.

Jeffrey gazed at me with warmth in his eyes. Then after giving me some additional information, such as how I should contact him next, he left.

And so began my daily life surrounded by agents of Marquess Randall, all to protect Katarina.

Today, just like every other day, I was surrounded exclusively by Marquess Randall’s underlings. Though I had made the decision to subject myself to these circumstances, in order to uncover the marquess’s scheme, I had already had quite enough of it. It was *incredibly* annoying.

On top of that, the fact that the marquess’s agents were so close to me meant that I had to be especially careful not to allow the fact that I was trying to uncover his scheme to slip out. The effort involved left me excessively exhausted.

After sighing internally, and noting that I had lost count of how many times I had done so, one of my usual servants came into my room. Marquess Randall had seen to it that my usual servants were all removed, far away from my room—or so I had told them to *pretend*. Actually, they were to spy on the servants sent by Marquess Randall, and surreptitiously serve as my personal bodyguards. This meant that, although I may have been surrounded by Randall’s underlings, I was not in any real danger.

They were also responsible for delivering any items that I did not wish for Marquess Randall’s men to see.

“A report on conditions within the city, Your Highness,” said one of my usual servants, handing me an envelope with a sheet of paper inside.

“Ah, thank you very much. I would like to make a proper study of our citizens’ opinions, so can I ask you all to leave me alone for a moment?” I said, forcing a smile. The servants surrounding me pulled faces, looking as if they might object, but at least for the time being, they left the room.

I let out a heavy sigh, for real this time. “This is really wearing me out,” I muttered to myself, before opening the envelope to read what was inside. In familiar handwriting, the following words were written: “If you have any information concerning Fray Randall, please let me know.”

I had decided on a number of code terms with my usual servants. “A report on conditions within the city” meant “Related to Katarina.”

Judging by the contents of this letter, Katarina already knew something about the present commotion. And she was asking for my assistance. Under normal circumstances, I would have run to her side at once, to help her however I could, but for now, I could not make any sudden moves. I understood what I needed to do right now in order to protect her.

I stealthily tucked the letter inside one of my hands. At times like these, when I was so emotionally drained, I wanted to see my love’s face more than ever. I wished wholeheartedly to hear her voice, but for the time being, I knew that I could not.

In a letter that I would entrust to Alan, who knew at least a little of my circumstances, I wrote everything I had managed to find out about Fray Randall. I was confident that Alan, who secretly longed for Katarina and believed that no one had yet found this out, would carry this letter to her.

When I thought of how my brother would be able to see Katarina, when I could not go to her despite wanting so desperately to be near her, I felt a pang of jealousy in my chest. But, remembering that these were extraordinary circumstances, I realized that it could not be helped, and I pushed those feelings down. One of my usual servants, one I could trust, would surely take this letter to Alan.

Katarina, please try not to do anything dangerous, I thought to myself.

★★★★★★★

Alan told us about the situation Jeord had found himself in. Through Marquess Randall's machinations, Jeord was now surrounded by the marquess's henchmen, who had even replaced his servants, so he could not move as freely as he had in the past.

Consequently, although he wanted nothing more than to run straight to the Ministry to assist us today, he was only able to ask Alan to deliver a letter explaining that he was unable to do so.

"I would have expected Prince Jeord to send those henchmen packing and come to Lady Katarina's aid. Such restraint is rare for him," muttered Mary.

Alan replied, "It looks like there are all kinds of obstacles to that approach this time."

The truth was that, up until now, every time I had found myself in serious trouble, Jeord had come and saved me. So I had expected to be able to rely on him without even thinking, taking him for granted...

If I really thought about it, however, it was incredible to have a prince from a real-life kingdom rush to my aid whenever I was in trouble, even if he was my fiancé. But this time, Jeord could not come and help. This fact left me feeling uneasy.

"Well, we shall be just fine even with one Prince Jeord fewer, or even two fewer. After all, Lady Katarina, you have *me*, Mary Hunt!" It was as if she had read the concern written on my face.

"Thank you, Mary."

She responded with an encouraging smile.

"Um, I hate to interrupt your excitement, but as Jeord himself could not come, could you look over the information he sent me to deliver?" Alan spoke up again after glancing at Mary.

"Ah yes, thank you for bringing that. Please, let us see it," agreed Mary after a pause.

"Sure." Alan then showed us the letter he had carried for Jeord, which contained the following information about Fray.

Fray Randall. Seventeen years old. Member of the Academy of Magic's student council. Daughter of one of Marquess Randall's mistresses.

Although she has been engaged a number of times in the past, ultimately Marquess Randall did not find any of these prospects to be satisfactory, so each engagement was dissolved. At no point is Fray reported to have made any objections herself.

Subsequently, despite several matchmaking attempts, Marquess Randall still found no one satisfactory, so these did not lead to a new engagement. Currently, Fray Randall has no fiancé.

Since enrolling at the Academy of Magic, in accordance with Marquess Randall's wishes, Fray has gone through another series of matchmaking attempts. However, from that point on, Fray has been seen to engage in unprecedented behavior, including rejecting prospective husbands on the spot of her own volition, showing a discrepancy between Marquess Randall's wishes and Fray's own actions.

Furthermore, according to the testimony of Fray's acquaintances from before she enrolled at the Academy of Magic, Fray seems like a different person since starting at the academy. Before enrolling, she was seen to have a vaguely gloomy demeanor, with no other discernible emotions, but since the commencement of her studies at the academy, she seems very cheerful and has even started to voice her own opinions. However, her father, Marquess Randall, does not seem to have been amused by this change.

Since beginning her studies, Fray hardly ever returns home to Randall Manor. Even during extended vacations from school, she has applied to remain in her dormitory at the academy. Fray appears to be very close to Ginger Tucker, who is in the same year as her and is also a member of the student council.

A few days ago, Fray received a letter from her family instructing her to return to Randall Manor. Subsequently, her "family obligations" seem to have consumed more time than she expected, because she has taken time off from school.

Since Fray returned to Randall Manor, no one outside the house has reported seeing her once. There is no sign of her having left the house at all.

I hardly knew what to say about this letter. All of the information we had worked so hard to gather between us was written down here. Since Jeord was said to have found himself surrounded by Marquess Randall's men, perhaps that was why he had investigated the marquess, but still, this was amazing. I felt a newfound respect for Jeord's abilities.

After reading through the letter herself, Ginger spoke up. "If this information is correct, can we take it to mean that Fray is indeed inside Randall Manor?"

"These findings come to us from Prince Jeord—a member of the

royal family—so I think we can assume that they are correct," said Mary.

"If no one from outside has seen Fray even once, that means that she hasn't even stepped out into the garden. As you said just a moment ago, big sister, perhaps she is being kept confined to the house." Keith frowned.

"Fray is being kept confined to her father's house?" wondered Alan, who looked like he had not quite been following the conversation up until that point.

After we gave him an explanation of our theory, he replied, "I see. I wouldn't put it past Marquess Randall." Alan seemed to accept our assumptions. Apparently, he knew more about Marquess Randall than anyone else in the room.

"Excuse me, Prince Alan. About Marquess Randall... What sort of person is he?" I asked him.

"What sort of person, you ask... Hmm, how can I put it? He's got a *super* aristocratic air about him, a highly elitist attitude, and especially likes to heap flattery on the royal family. Only, he does still act thoroughly hostile toward anyone who opposes him, so elder brother Ian gets nothing more than the most minimal pleasantries from him."

"Ah, that's right, Marquess Randall is part of Prince Jeffrey's faction!"

"Right, right, so he has a bad attitude toward anyone in elder brother Ian's faction. Pretty much the only other member of that faction he shows any grace is Duke Berg, who occupies an equal or, in fact, a higher position than he does."

"Duke Berg? You mean Lady Selena's father?" Selena was Ian's fiancée. We had interacted briefly in the past and still got along well.

"Yeah, naturally his haughtiness doesn't extend to dukes. Just like with elder brother Ian, the marquess exchanges the most minimal of pleasantries with Duke Berg."

"Really..." *So the marquess has a highly elitist outlook, and behaves in a despicable manner toward anyone whose social standing is lower than his own. He almost sounds like, what's the word...?*

"He sounds almost like a villain," I finally muttered.

A look of understanding spread over Alan's face. "Sure, he *does* give off that vibe. That's a good comparison to make."

Ugh, so Fray's father is a villain. The more I learn about this

situation, the worse I feel. Mary did say that he probably wouldn't do anything any time soon, but still, I can't help but worry...

"About this villain Marquess Randall. I happen to have heard the rumors about his many concubines and mistresses. If he indeed has so many, would he not also have many children? I would expect that there is no need for him to try and force Fray, who has rejected every prospect so far, to accept a fiancé. What do you think?" asked Mary, turning to look at Alan.

This was my first time hearing this information, so I was surprised. Keith and Alan, on the other hand, showed no sign of having been shocked, so they must have known about it already.

"I have been thinking the very same thing. I have, after all, heard the rumor that his concubines and mistresses are so numerous that one could not even count them on the fingers of both hands."

When I heard this statement from Keith, the villainy gauge I was keeping track of for Marquess Randall in my head shot up a second time. *Well, isn't Marquess Randall a villain among villains? Hasn't he covered just about everything that society deems unacceptable?*

"Yeah, just as the rumors say, he does have a lot of concubines. He also has a shocking number of mistresses. They do say that he's had quite a few children with them as well, but..." At this point, Alan paused and scratched his head. When he resumed speaking, his tone was evasive. "Not many people know what I'm about to tell you. I mean, Marquess Randall has done everything in his power to see that it doesn't get out. But the truth is that, though this is rare for such a high-ranking noble, Marquess Randall has no magical powers. So he didn't even attend the Academy of Magic."

"Wow... But why doesn't he want anyone to know about that?" Despite being the daughter of a duke, the limit of my magical powers was the rather lackluster Dirt Bump, but it was not as if I had tried to hide that fact. As a result, the other noblewomen who had set their sights on Jeord would say nasty things behind my back about my near total lack of magic, but that was the extent of the abuse. It did not really do me any harm.

Keith seemed to struggle to find words. "Big sister," he started, gazing at me with an expression of despair on his face.

Look, little brother, I really don't understand why you would stare at me with such pity in your eyes.

Eventually, Keith continued, “Well, how should I put it? There are some who think that the ability to use magic is the very foundation of noble status. They say something like, the more powerful your magic is, the more you can throw your weight around... Though that isn’t true at all. However, while we do live in a world where some people think like that, it’s also a fact that the higher up the ranks one looks among nobles, the more people you will find with magical powers. In particular, the heads of noble houses are almost certain to be able to use magic. As a result, a lot will be said by those with a prejudiced outlook about anyone who becomes a lord without possessing any magical powers.”

“You mean, like people who are close to the royal family despite their magical powers not being a big deal? Are there really people who worry about magic that much?” I simply repeated something that I had heard very often.

Whereupon Alan burst out laughing. “Oh yeah. I guess it isn’t a big deal to you.”

“Yep. It is not as if people have attacked me over it, and at the end of the day, they are only speaking the truth. I really don’t give it much thought.” Although even I had felt a little bit sad when I was told that, no matter how much I applied myself in my studies, I could not expect very good marks (though it did not really bother me much when I heard it from people who did not know me well). Still, when people wondered how I had got where I was, even though I hardly had any magical powers, I saw it as the simple truth. There was nothing I could do as an individual to change it, so I tried not to worry about it. In fact, I did not think that there was any need to worry about it.

Alan thought for a moment. “I guess you’re right... You’re absolutely right, but people with a prejudiced way of thinking, like Keith just mentioned, worry about it a lot. Marquess Randall is truly a textbook example of such a person, and he feels deeply ashamed of the fact that he has no magical powers. That’s the very reason why he hides this fact, and why he apparently wanted nothing more than for someone with magic to be born in his bloodline.”

“Is that why he gathered more mistresses than anyone can keep track of?” asked Mary, who was always quick on the uptake.

When I heard this, I thought to myself, *I see!*

“That’s exactly why. For his lawfully wedded wife, it seems that he used his wealth and influence to take a woman of high magical

aptitude from the family of a count. When Susanna was born with high magical aptitude, he was apparently overjoyed, and walked around town announcing the birth."

"Oh, but in that case, why did he not live happily ever after?" I would have thought that, despite having no magic of his own, once he had found a wife with strong magical abilities who had gone on to actually give birth to a child with strong magic, he would have considered his wish to have been granted. Though I did feel sorry for the woman forced to become his wife.

"No, it looks like that only stoked Marquess Randall's ambition. He started to wish for children with even stronger magic. Apparently, after his lawful wife gave birth to Susanna, her health deteriorated, and she could no longer expect to have children. So for his future offspring, the marquess used his wealth and influence to acquire a series of concubines and mistresses with magical aptitude."

Marquess Randall, just how deep is your lust for power? The more I hear about the man, the more I think that he's beyond redemption.

"So, did this go as planned for Marquess Randall?" prompted Keith, with most of his face contorted in a grimace. The purehearted Keith, having grown up being told by me to act like a gentleman toward women, probably looked on men like Marquess Randall, who treated women like objects, with nothing but contempt.

"Unfortunately for him, it seems that it did not. The only children he had with high magical aptitude were Susanna and Fray. Besides those two, he had a few with some magic, but apparently the vast majority had no powers at all. Although there's no guarantee that a parent's magic will be passed down to their children, the children of parents without magic tend to be born without magic, so that could have been foreseen," explained Alan.

"That would mean that, as long as Lady Susanna is still engaged to Prince Jeffrey, the only child Marquess Randall can confidently thrust upon the royal family as a potential bride is Fray, wouldn't it?" asked Mary.

Alan nodded. "Yes, it would."

It was difficult enough for most nobles to present their daughters to the royal family as potential brides, but no one without magic had ever succeeded in doing so. There were cases in which noblewomen with meager magic had been accepted, as was

the case with my engagement to Jeord, for example. I asked if Marquess Randall might not be able to offer such a daughter to the royal family.

Alan answered, “If he’s going to present a daughter in opposition to your preexisting engagement to Jeord, he can hardly offer one with the same level of magical ability as you, can he?”

I see, so that’s the reason… That’s why Marquess Randall feels that Fray can’t be replaced by one of his other daughters. Though if that’s how it is…

“In that case, if one of us is able to shelter Fray from Marquess Randall, he will no longer be able to approach Prince Jeord. He will be left without any means of challenging our engagement,” I declared. Everyone opened their eyes wide in surprise.

“Did I just say something peculiar?” I asked.

Keith shook his head, then answered, “No… On the contrary, I’m shocked to hear you hit the nail on the head like that, big sister.”

Umm, are you really praising me, or just insulting me?

“You’re right. By Katarina’s standards, she really did just hit the nail on the head. She’s totally right. If we can free Fray and ensure her safety from Marquess Randall, he will no longer have any sway in this matter,” chimed in Alan, nodding to indicate his agreement.

Just what does everyone here think of me…?

“However, freeing Fray will be difficult, will it not? If she is being closely guarded to prevent her from stepping outside of Randall Manor, it will not be easy for us to reach her,” mused Mary, frowning.

She’s right. You could even say that Fray is a prisoner right now.

“But maybe we can find a way to rescue her stealthily. Like that time we rescued Keith.”

This suggestion from me prompted Sora, who had been staying quiet, to finally speak up. “The mansion we infiltrated that time did not have such tight security. We cannot compare that to the estate of a high-ranking noble.” Because of his role, and the fact that he was in front of everyone else, Sora’s words were polite, but he gave me a look as if to say *What the heck are you talking about?*

“That’s absolutely right. Trying to sneak into a high-ranking noble’s mansion is a fool’s errand,” added Alan, agreeing with Sora.

With a troubled expression on her face, Mary seemed to concur as well. “It does seem difficult.”

“Big sister, I’m afraid that does sound impossible,” reiterated Keith, shaking his head.

Maria, too, looked at me as if to say that she doubted it could be done.

Sophia only repeated, “Sneaking into a mansion in secret,” under her breath over and over. Judging by her expression, she was actually a bit excited, but this was surely only the work of her nerdy imagination, which came from reading too many novels.

Looks like nobody will support my plan. Certainly, even I have to admit that sneaking into a high-ranking noble’s mansion to rescue someone imprisoned there sounds difficult.

“But don’t we have a lineup of this kingdom’s top players gathered here today? We should be able to do just about anything! Besides, I know where we can find the strongest backup player around. If I can talk to that person and get their support, will you all help me as well?”

When I blurted this out in desperation, everyone’s attitude shifted, as if to say “Well, if you’re really dead set on this, we’ll go along with it.”

“But just who is our strongest backup player? Don’t tell me you mean Duke Claes? Though he certainly does seem as if he would go to any lengths to help his daughter, I don’t think he can help us this time, considering his position,” said Alan.

I nodded. “I know that. I don’t mean father.”

“Then who on earth—”

“I’ll try to contact them now. Just wait here a minute,” I said, speaking over Alan, before walking straight out of the meeting room. While I continued to walk steadily after leaving the room, Sora followed in a hurry.

“Hey, you can’t run off all of a sudden like that. It makes it hard to be your bodyguard,” grumbled Sora, walking a short distance behind me.

That’s right, Sora is *the one guarding me for the time being.*

“Ah, sorry about that. I completely forgot that you were guarding me.”

“That’s what I thought, but... I understand that you want to save your school friend, but don’t forget your own situation.”

“Okay.” I knew Sora was only worried about me, so I nodded earnestly.

“By the way, where are you going? And who on earth is this

‘strongest backup player’ of yours?”

“Right here. This is where I’m going.” Because I had been walking quite quickly, I found that I had arrived almost immediately.

“But this is...our department, isn’t it? What is the meaning of this? You’re going to ask someone from the department for help?”

Indeed, we had arrived at the Magical Tool Laboratory, the very Ministry department where we worked.

“Yep, that’s right. I know someone who is sure to help us out.”

“Don’t tell me you’re going to ask Mr. Wolt for help? If memory serves, he is kind of a soft touch, so I think he’ll agree as soon as you ask him for help, but I still don’t think it’s fair to add to his already heavy workload...”

“Though I certainly would like to bring Raphael on board, I do understand how tough things are for him already, so I won’t be asking him.”

“Then who—”

“Excuse me,” I said, entering the office instead of answering Sora’s question. I then headed to Raphael, who was acting head of the department for today. “Sorry for disturbing you while you are so busy. I would like to contact Lady Larna. How can I go about doing so?”

“Ah, if it is Lady Larna you want to see, she is scheduled to be back here in just a moment.”

“Oh, is that so? In that case, may we wait here for a little while?”

“Of course you may. More importantly, are you all right?”

After suddenly asking for time off from work because of something urgent concerning a friend, I had appeared in the office again asking to speak with Lady Larna. I suppose that this was enough for Raphael to figure out that there was trouble afoot.

Still, though Raphael cared enough to show concern, I knew that he would not ask any more questions if I did not invite him to do so. He really was a decent person. Incidentally, the only reason I did not give him more details was that I did not want him caught up in this. Though Fray was in some sense his junior at the Academy of Magic, by the time she had enrolled, he was no longer attending the academy, so they had never even met.

Besides, in consideration of the many years of tyranny Raphael had suffered at the hands of House Dieke, another family of high-

ranking nobles, I did not wish to involve him in this sort of family conflict.

"Thank you very much for asking. But I am fine," I replied.

Raphael smiled softly. "Do please ask me for help if it looks like things might turn dangerous."

What a kind and open-minded person Raphael was. "Yes, sir," I answered with a nod. I went back to my desk to wait for Larna.

While we were waiting, Sora asked in a low voice, "Is your backup player Lady Larna?"

"That's right."

Sora looked confused. "Lady Larna does care about her subordinates, but I don't think she's enough of a sucker to make an enemy out of a big shot aristocrat just to help someone who is a complete stranger to her."

"Hmmm, that may be so... Well, I just have a hunch about her."

During our exchange, the door to the office opened and the very person we had been waiting for appeared.

"I'm back!" announced Larna, before heading straight to Raphael's desk and talking to him. Most likely she had come to hear his report on the day's work. Once they had finished speaking, Raphael must have told Larna we were waiting for her, because she turned to look at us before swiftly walking over to my desk.

"I hear you have something you'd like to talk to me about. What is it?" As I expected, she really had come after hearing from Raphael that we wanted to see her.

"As a matter of fact, Lady Larna, there is something I would like to tell you about Fray Randall, my school friend from the Academy of Magic." The moment I said Fray's name, there was a clear change in Larna's expression.

"Understood. I'll hear what you have to say. But not here. We'll use another room." Larna ushered us into a vacant room near our office. "Now tell me, what's happened with this school friend of yours?" asked Larna as soon as we had privacy.

"Yes, ma'am. The truth is—" I told Larna that Fray had begun to introduce herself as a new candidate to be engaged to Jeord, but that we suspected that she had not done this of her own volition. Instead, we thought that her father had forced her to do so.

Furthermore, I explained that after being called back to her family home, Fray had not returned to the academy and that no one had been able to contact her. I revealed that, given the

circumstances, we thought that Fray was most likely being confined to Randall Manor against her will, and we wanted to rescue her. I told Larna everything I had discussed with my friends.

After silently listening to everything I had to say, Larna said, "So, what do you want me to do?"

I looked her squarely in the eye. "I would like your cooperation in sneaking Fray out of Randall Manor. If possible, I hope you will lend us any magical tools you think we might find useful."

Larna looked straight back at me and thought silently for a while. "Understood. I'll help you."

Sora's expression was one of shock. He had only just told me a short while ago that he didn't think Larna would agree to help us so easily.

"Excuse me, Lady Larna. Are you absolutely sure? If Marquess Randall finds out that you helped us, there is a chance that you might make an enemy out of him." As if he just couldn't help himself, Sora checked whether Larna was really on board.

"Doesn't bother me," Larna said simply. Realizing that this warning had not dissuaded her from accepting our request, Sora decided not to say anything more about it. "I have some work to do later today, so I can't talk for long. If you've put any documents together on Fray's situation, then have them sent to me. If you ask Raphael, I'm sure he'll arrange that for you."

"Yes, ma'am. Prince Jeord was good enough to gather some information for us, so we will send a copy of his letter to you."

"Good. Once I've looked over that, I'll consider what tools we'll need and how to go about rescuing Fray before contacting you again."

"Thank you very much." I was pleased to discover that Larna was even more proactive than I had expected. Though I had been sure that she would help us, to be perfectly honest, I had not expected her to take such an active role.

"Well then, I'll be going. Actually, sorry, but do you mind if I speak with Miss Katarina in private, just for a moment?" requested Larna, looking in Sora's direction.

"If she is with you, Lady Larna, I cannot see any problem with that. I shall wait outside." Sora then left the room.

Once it was just the two of us together in the room, Larna looked me squarely in the eye with a serious expression on her face,

before asking, “Why did you decide to come to me with this problem?”

“Because I felt sure that you would help us to rescue Fray, Lady Larna,” I answered firmly.

“But why?” Larna continued, still staring at me. Her eyes showed that she was deadly serious.

Having come this far, I had no intention of beating around the bush. I gave her a firm response: “I know that you care very deeply about your subordinates, Lady Larna. I also did not believe that you would abandon Fray, a *family member* in need.” Once I had unambiguously declared that Fray Randall was a member of Larna’s family, her eyes opened wide, and the corners of her mouth turned up slightly in a smile.

“How long have you known?” she asked, with an almost mischievous smile on her face. These words were all the proof I needed that my suspicions had been correct. I had finally uncovered the true identity of Larna Smith, the enigma of the Magical Ministry, whom no one else had managed to identify until now.

While steadily meeting Larna’s gaze, I answered her query. “As I came to spend more time with you while you were in that other guise, I started to feel a stronger affinity with you, and began to observe you more closely. After that, I soon realized where else I had seen you.”

Larna blinked in surprise after hearing my answer, then let out a long sigh. “To think that you would realize so soon, Miss Katarina. I adjusted my attitude substantially, and even used a magical tool to alter my appearance. Was it really so easy to tell?”

Seeing that Larna looked a little dejected, I shook my head. “No, it definitely wasn’t *easy* to tell. If I hadn’t spent so much time around you while you were in that guise, then I don’t think I would have realized. However, recognizing people close to me is my one and only talent.”

“Now that you mention it, Raphael said that you immediately saw through his disguise too. What an unexpected special skill.”

Larna actually sounded impressed when she said that, but can this really be considered a special skill? I don't really think it's a big deal. Besides...

"But I quickly forget anyone I'm not very close to, even after exchanging greetings with them a number of times. As a result, I am really not very familiar with the people occupying high society." *So I'm really not especially good at remembering people.*

"Ha ha ha, that's pretty extreme. So it actually only works with a certain subset of people."

"Precisely." If I could see through any person's disguise, it would be quite a useful ability, but it really was limited to people I felt close to, making it very rarely useful.

My plain reply seemed to tickle Larna somehow, as she started laughing once again. When her laughter had died down, she said, "Now then, though I hate to change the subject when you've finally managed to make use of your special skill, can we keep this just between you and me for the time being? If people around here found out who I really am, it would cause a lot of problems."

"Yes, ma'am. That is what I figured, so I haven't told anyone." If this were a subject she did not mind me talking about, then considering her personality, I would have expected Larna to be more outspoken about it herself. That she had not revealed it told me that I should not talk about it either.

"Ha ha ha, you're very perceptive. I'm grateful." Larna laughed again.

"Um, it looks like I was correct in guessing your other identity, Lady Larna, but I would just like to make sure of something else. By rescuing Fray on this occasion we will be subverting Marquess Randall's wishes—to be frank, I think he will consider this a hostile act—so are you sure you still want to help us?"

In her other guise, Larna was the marquess's daughter, and it was rumored that they did not get along well. However, I could not confirm to what extent this was true by only talking to other people. That was why I felt I had to ask Larna herself if she was really prepared to do something that her father may consider hostile.

Larna's answer to my query was simple. "Yeah, that doesn't bother me. I have always considered *that man* to be my greatest

enemy. Though I'm not sufficiently prepared yet, he is an opponent I will have to defeat when the time comes. Baring my teeth briefly now won't be a big deal. Actually, I'm looking forward to seeing how he responds when someone he only ever thought of as a tool to serve him finally pushes back." She clearly accepted this risk.

It seemed that the rumors were true. In fact, it sounded like their relationship could not be summed up by such gentle words as "not getting along well." Larna not only referred to her father as "that man" but had clearly identified him as an "enemy."

I paused for a moment, then said, "I see. In that case, I am looking forward to working with you." From the look on Larna's face, I judged that it would be better for me to not stick my nose into her business any further, or ask any more questions, so I simply bowed my head.

Larna grinned. "Just leave it to me."

Once we had finished our private discussion, Larna went back to work once more and I headed back to the room where my friends awaited me, accompanied by Sora. After I arrived back at the room and announced that Larna would be helping us, everyone looked shocked, and asked the reason why. When I told them that I could not tell them why, they seemed to immediately take my point and did not pursue the matter any further. And they were delighted to hear that we would have such a strong collaborator.

"Now that we have the cooperation of one of the top officials in the Ministry, and even the chance to borrow magical tools, it looks like we have no choice but to give this plan our all," groused Keith, sounding exasperated by this thought. Everyone else gathered there voiced their agreement. We went on to iron out the details of our plan to rescue Fray.

"First of all, I would like to make sure that Fray really is inside the mansion," stated Mary.

"Fair enough. There wouldn't be much point in sneaking in only to find that the person we came to save isn't there," agreed Alan.

"In the first place, even if we do manage to get in, it'll be impossible to find Fray if we search the mansion at random. If we can't pinpoint her location, getting her out will be tough," remarked Keith.

"Is she in the mansion or isn't she, and if she is there, where exactly is she? These are the questions we need to answer first," I

declared.

"Excuse me, but might we perhaps ask that little bear for help in answering such questions?" suggested Maria, raising her hand.

"By little bear, do you mean—"

"Yes. I mean that little bear Lady Larna turned into a magical tool."

So she does mean that bear who always takes a really nasty, combative attitude with me exclusively.

"Fray's magic is strong, so as long as we have an item that she is very fond of, I think he will be able to determine her location."

Right, that bear has the ability to detect people with strong magic. On the flip side, he can't track people with weaker magic, but Fray's is strong.

"Ginger, can you think of anything Fray owns that she's very fond of?" I inquired of Ginger, who was especially close to Fray.

"Something she is very fond of... By that, do you mean something like an item she cherishes?"

"Yep. Can you think of anything?"

"Let me see. I can think of something, but if she was carrying it with her, we won't find it at the academy. I do not know whether or not it will still be in her dormitory."

"I see, so her dormitory room is still as she left it. Right, let's go and check out her room," I suggested.

Keith stopped me short. "Big sister, you're in too much of a hurry. If we're going to Fray's room, it would be more efficient to take the bear with us. Maria, is the magical tool at your place right now?"

"Yes. He is in my room in the Ministry dormitory. Shall I go and fetch him now?"

Before I could say, "Yes please, Maria," Keith cut me off again.

"No, there's no need to get it now," said Keith, shaking his head.

"Why not? We have to hurry." I started to get out of my chair.

Keith looked at me steadily, and admonished me with the following words: "We've just heard that Fray is irreplaceable to Marquess Randall, haven't we? You don't need to fret so much. Rather, I should say that, if you act in a hurry while fretting, the risk of Marquess Randall discovering our plan will be greater. There is a chance that Fray's dormitory room is being watched. Rushing in now would be dangerous."

I paused to digest this. “I see. You’re totally right.” I had been on the verge of just rushing in headfirst again. I needed to reflect on this bad habit of mine.

“Well then, it sounds like we need to confirm whether Marquess Randall has anyone keeping watch around Fray’s room before we go in there. Shall we ask someone who might be especially good at that sort of thing to go and check?” Mary suggested.

Did Mary happen to know someone who might be good at that sort of thing? I found myself starting to worry about the company she was keeping.

“No, I don’t want to give the marquess the chance to discover our plan by looking for someone outside of this group. For that reason, while I’m sorry to ask this of you when you’re already executing a request to work as Katarina’s bodyguard, Sora Smith, would you mind going?” asked Keith, turning his gaze on Sora.

Thinking back, Sora was especially good at this sort of thing. That time when we had to rescue Keith, Sora had scoped out the surrounding area for me.

After a brief sigh, Sora responded, “Understood. As I have already been drawn in this far, I will accompany you all to the very end. I will go and confirm whether there is anyone watching Fray Randall’s dormitory.” Sora gave off the impression that he felt he had no choice but to agree.

“Well then, once we’re inside Fray’s dormitory room, we’ll look for something Fray is very fond of, then have the bear sniff out Fray’s scent from it so it can track her location. Once we have that, we’ll go and rescue her. Yeah. I’m starting to feel like we can actually do this.” After I made this declaration, everyone gave me a look as if they were not sure what they should say.

But after a moment, Alan cautioned, “We don’t even know whether the first part of your plan will succeed yet, and the rescue itself sounds like the most challenging part.” He then smiled wryly. “Still, for some strange reason, hearing you say that makes me feel like we might be able to do it.” Everyone else adopted a similar expression.

“You are quite right. As long as we have Lady Katarina with us, anything seems possible,” declared Mary.

“Indeed, I believe Lady Katarina will resolve this crisis in splendid fashion, like the protagonist in a story,” added Sophia.

Maria nodded. “Yes. With Lady Katarina, I am sure everything

will be fine."

Keith hesitated before conceding, "I see your point. There's something about my big sister that makes me think we can somehow do it."

Sora just gave me a mischievous grin, like a child caught in a prank.

"Okay then, let's all do our best to rescue Fray!" I cried, standing up from my chair and raising my fist in the air. But for some reason I found I did not have the strength, and I plopped back down in my chair.

"Big sister!" cried Keith.

"Lady Katarina!" cried the other girls.

"Katarina!" cried Alan.

With looks of shock on their faces, everyone crowded around me.

"What's the matter?"

"Did you eat something funny?"

"Do you have a stomachache?"

Hey, why does everyone always assume that I must have eaten something weird, or that I have a stomachache, whenever I look unwell? Why are those always their first concerns? Well, I suppose when I was a kid, I did often hurt my tummy by eating fruit from the trees around my home, or by eating too much at tea parties, but by now I have learned to recognize the different types of fruit, and to only eat until I am eighty percent full at tea parties. These days, that sort of thing hardly ever happens.

"No, it's not that my stomach hurts. I just don't seem to have the strength to stand up." After I reported this, Keith peered at me closely before placing his hand on my forehead.

"Ah, looks like you have a fever." He furrowed his brow.

"Huh, a fever?" Though I had not noticed it myself, now that he mentioned it, I was perplexed to find that my body did feel very warm.

"Yeah. Do you have any other symptoms? Like queasiness? Or a headache?"

Once Keith asked me this, I tried paying closer attention to my body, but felt nothing out of the ordinary besides my body feeling very warm and lacking strength. I relayed this information to Keith.

After thinking for a moment, he observed, "You've had a lot on your mind. Perhaps it's just the result of overthinking. You used to

have that sort of fever quite a lot in the past."

Come to think of it, maybe I did experience similar fevers a lot as a child. At any rate, since I had just realized that I had reincarnated as the villainess in an otome game, I would have had a lot to think about.

"Now that you mention it, this may be similar to the sudden bouts of fever I had when I was still a kid. I would often feel weak, just like this—"

And then I would feel very sleepy, I wanted to say, but before my lips could form the words, I felt my eyelids suddenly grow very heavy.

"Ah, big sister," I heard Keith say in surprise, before feeling something warm gently envelop my body. Though it was not soft, I could hear a pleasant thumping sound. I thought that this might not be such a bad way to sleep. As I started to drift away into sleep, I could hear the pleasant sound speeding up.

★★★★★★★

I saw pink walls, a black table, and a bed with a metal frame. On the bed I saw an azure duvet and blue cushions. This was my best friend Acchan's room, where I had come to hang out all the time in my past life. I recognized this as the dream I started having once I began working at the Magical Ministry.

I would probably get to see Acchan playing *Fortune Lover II*, the sequel I never got the chance to experience while I was still alive. Through this dream, I had already managed to learn some details about the game.

Most days, I would be thrilled by this opportunity to learn about *Fortune Lover II*, but right now, given Fray's crisis, I was more interested in any hints it could provide to help me rescue Fray. After the game's opening animation finished playing on the TV screen, the game itself began.

I wonder, which character's route will she play today? If possible, I would like to see her play one of the routes related to my own doom, one of the new characters in *Fortune Lover II*: Sora, Cyrus, Dewey, or the hidden character, Cezar. There was even supposed to be one more hidden character, so if I was really lucky, I might even get to see her play that route! But despite wishing with all my might to see a new character, it was Jeord that appeared on the screen.

Jeord again? It's just like the last time I had this dream. Thanks to a nice guess on my part, I got to find out how the game ends in my last dream, but to be honest, I'm no longer interested in the Jeord route.

After all, in this game, Katarina the villainess plays the role of a mystery woman working behind the scenes at the Magical Ministry, so she shouldn't even have an opportunity to interact with Jeord.

Hmmm. Looks like there wasn't much point in having this dream today, I thought, while gazing lazily at the TV screen. I could see Jeord and the protagonist, who had become close while attending the Academy of Magic together, enjoying a conversation and strengthening their bond even further. "Ha ha ha," and "Hee hee hee," they laughed.

You know, that note I found had revealed that the rival characters for each romanceable character in *Fortune Lover I* were also involved in the sequel, but Katarina, the protagonist's rival for the hearts of Jeord and Keith, was no longer in the same position, so what was going to happen?

While I was wondering about that, a new face appeared on the screen. I could not believe who it was.

"I will be the next candidate to be engaged to Prince Jeord." The one who appeared on the screen to speak these words was, without a doubt, Fray Randall, the very person I was trying to save at this very moment. The name on the screen read "???", but there was no mistaking her face. It was Fray!

Just what is happening here?! I was so shocked that my brain could no longer process what was happening, but the screen continued to dispense new information.

The protagonist's internal monologue revealed that this new character was her junior schoolmate in the student council. At this point, the name switched from "???" to "Fray Randall." This confirmed, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that it was Fray I was looking at.

The only difference was that the protagonist described Fray as "a quiet junior student she had barely spoken with before."

Fray was definitely not quiet, and as she was friendly with everyone, there was no reason why she would not have spoken with the protagonist (Maria) many times before.

So the game and reality really are different? In the first place, since I (Katarina) was not banished in this reality, I was still Jeord's fiancée.

However, this did at least mean that the current commotion in our reality, with Fray being forced to present herself as a candidate for marriage to Jeord, came straight from one of the game's scenarios. In other words, Fray's role at this point in the game was...

"Oh, looks like the Jeord route has a new rival character," Acchan muttered to herself while playing the game. Thanks to her habit of talking to herself while playing games, I was able to confirm my suspicions.

So Fray is the new rival for the Jeord route! Since Katarina managed to slip away, I guess Fray was used to fill in the space she left behind. Though it isn't really my fault, I'm sorry, Fray.

"A woman of your social class is not suitable for Prince Jeord. I would like you to refrain from acting too familiar toward him," droned Fray in an indifferent tone of voice.

She makes a pretty mild rival compared to Katarina, the villainess in Fortune Lover I. *Or was Katarina just way too intense? I guess Mary and Sophia didn't go as far as she did.*

However, although it was definitely Fray's face, her expression was lifeless and I could see no light in her eyes. She was completely different from the real Fray.

Feeling a pang in my chest, I turned my gaze away, only to see that a game manual on the floor was opened to a page about Fray's role as a rival character. Printed there were the words "The daughter of Marquess Randall, Fray has virtually no will of her own and obediently follows whatever instructions the marquess gives her."

Ah, so this is how Fray used to be, before she joined the academy. In our reality, Fray has changed dramatically since joining the Academy of Magic, but Fray in the game had not gone through the same change, and continued to have her freedom restricted by Marquess Randall.

I do not want Fray to go back to that way of life, not now that she has finally found a goal in life, sparking the light in her eyes. But am I sure that I can save her?!

My eyes came to rest on the page in the game manual opposite the one showing Fray. Incredibly, it also depicted someone I recognized.

No way, is that Ginger?! Why is Ginger in the manual?! Does she appear in the game as a friend of Fray's?

I cast my eyes over the description of Ginger. Her picture's caption read "One of your juniors in the student council, Ginger is

earnest and inflexible. She secretly longs to be with Keith, the first man to treat her like a girl."

Huh?! Are you kidding me?! I had no idea that Ginger had feelings for Keith! I mean, looking at the way things are arranged here, and what it says about Ginger, she must be the new rival character for the Keith route! So these cute younger schoolmates take the place of Katarina the villainess in Fortune Lover II. *What a shocking development.*

Fray was only pursuing Jeord because her father had forced her to do so, but that same could not be said for Ginger. *Is she really in love with Keith? I wonder. Judging by her behavior around him...*

"Whoa, looks like an unwelcome development," remarked Acchan, snapping my attention back to the game screen. While I was lost in thought, it looked like the game's story had advanced quite a bit.

Huh? All of a sudden, the protagonist was inside a mysterious building. *Where is this?* I thought to myself.

The protagonist uttered a similar question: "I wonder where I am."

What do you mean? Did you go inside a building without knowing what it was? Trespassing is bad, you know. As I was chiding the protagonist, Fray appeared on the screen.

"Are you awake?" asked Fray.

"Fray? What is happening? Where am I?" asked the protagonist.

"This is the basement of Randall Manor. There are not even any windows, so no one will hear you, no matter how much noise you make."

Huh?! Wait a minute, what is she talking about?! The basement of Randall Manor?! Is there such a thing? Claes Manor doesn't have a basement like this, I'm pretty sure. What the heck is going on?

"What are you saying?" the protagonist's voice asked on my behalf.

"Though I need to become Prince Jeord's fiancée as soon as possible, you have become very close to him, so I consider you to be an obstacle. Therefore, I have decided to have you stay here for a short while."

"You can't be serious!"

"Do not worry. In the past, I was often sent here when I failed to properly execute Marquess Randall's wishes. You will find that, once you get used to it, you will not have any trouble passing the time here."

Fray's casual confession left the protagonist at a loss for words. It seemed that Fray had suffered terrible treatment at the hands of Marquess Randall in the game's world as well.

"Well then, I will excuse myself now. I will have your meal delivered at the appropriate time." Fray then disappeared, the door to the basement slamming shut behind her.

"What should I do?" murmured the protagonist.

But I had already decided what I had to do. I was going to rescue Fray. I was going to free her from Marquess Randall.

I awoke to find myself looking up at an unfamiliar ceiling. *Huh, where am I?* I wondered to myself.

"Ah! Lady Katarina is awake!" someone announced before walking over to me. I recognized a friend of mine with white hair and red eyes standing in front of me.

It still took me a moment to put a name to her face. "Sophia?"

"Yes."

"Where am I?"

Sophia was soon joined by Mary, who answered my question, "This is the Magical Ministry's infirmary, Lady Katarina. After you suddenly fainted, Master Keith brought you here."

Ah, come to think of it, I was running a fever, suddenly felt sleepy, and fell asleep on the spot. That warmth I felt at the time may have been from Keith catching me. It appeared that after having a fairly long dream about Acchan and learning more about Fray, I had been left feeling shaken, and reality itself seemed hazy. After taking a closer look at my surroundings, I recalled that I had been cared for in this very place before.

"The doctor was kind enough to examine you, but said that, besides a high fever, nothing seemed to be the matter with you, so we got permission for you to rest here. Are you feeling all right?" Mary asked, peering down at me with a look of concern on her face.

"Yeah, I'm fine. That sudden fever just made me feel very sleepy. Having slept for a little while, I feel completely refreshed," I replied.

Then, behind Mary and Sophia, I saw Ginger. After hesitating for a moment, she spoke up. "Really? I am so glad to hear that." Her expression softened, as if she was finally able to release the tension she had been feeling. Mary and Sophia also looked relieved. Apparently I had worried them a great deal.

“Where did everyone else go?” I wondered aloud. I had been told that Sora and Alan helped Keith to carry me here, but I could not see any of them in the infirmary.

“After the doctor assured them that you were fine, the boys all went to a separate room to wait. A lady was resting in this room, after all,” answered Mary, as if this should be obvious. Certainly, I might feel a little bit awkward if I knew that the boys in our group had been watching my sleeping face the whole time.

“Everyone seemed very worried, so I will go and tell them that you are awake, Lady Katarina.” Ginger then left the room.

As Mary and Sophia asked me if I was really all right, and I assured them that I was, I heard the bustle of footsteps in the corridor, and the boys appeared in the doorway.

“Big sister, are you okay?”

“Should you be up already?”

“Are you all right?”

Keith, Alan, and Sora voiced their concerns in turn.

“Yes, sorry for making you worry. I feel totally fine now,” I said. This was enough for Alan and Sora to breathe sighs of relief, but my adopted brother, always the worrywart, still seemed to doubt me.

Placing his hand on my forehead, Keith observed, “Looks like your fever has gone down compared to earlier.” Then a look of relief finally came over his face. “Although your fever has somewhat subsided, considering that you just fainted, you shouldn’t push yourself any further. Let’s go home for today. We’ll visit Fray’s dormitory room tomorrow.”

Keith was right. I knew that I had made everyone worry enough for one day, so I nodded meekly.

“Well then, I’ll call for the carriage to Claes Manor to be prepared for us. Do you think you can move by yourself now, big sister?” said Keith, holding out his hand to help me up.

I took it and practically leaped to my feet. My drowsiness from earlier was for the most part gone.

“Yeah. I should be fine. Just give me a minute,” I requested.

Keith obligingly dashed out the door.

“I am very glad to see that you have recovered, Lady Katarina. Master Keith was particularly worried about you,” Ginger told me.

That’s because, when we were very young, Keith saw me suffer from this sort of fever after thinking too much many times. So I might have

caused him more anxiety than was necessary.

"Master Keith immediately gathered you in his arms and gallantly brought you to this infirmary, Lady Katarina. It was almost like a picture in a storybook... Though I think *my* brother would have made for an even lovelier picture," gushed Sophia, before muttering something I could not quite make out to herself.

Come to think of it, Mary just told me that Keith carried me here, didn't she? While I thought to myself that I should really thank him properly for that later, Ginger stepped into my field of vision, with a start, and I remembered something.

Although it had been obscured by the shocking revelation that Fray was a rival character in *Fortune Lover II*, and had been treated terribly by Marquess Randall in the game as well, I had also learned that Ginger was featured as a rival character in the game.

Everyone else had told me how Keith had worried about me and carried me here himself, but if, as the game would have it, Ginger really did long to be with Keith, then her own feelings on the matter must be complicated indeed.

I mean, Keith did confess to me that he was in love with me, didn't he?

Having recalled my past life, where I never knew the first thing about romance, I was frightened by the very idea of it, and had avoided it up to this point. As I was also concerned about triggering flags leading to a Bad End in *Fortune Lover II*, I had convinced Keith to let me think about it.

Because Keith had been raised to be the very picture of loyalty, I did not think he was likely to just throw up his hands and move on to the next girl he laid eyes on... In other words, my mere presence meant that, if Ginger really did have feelings for Keith, those feelings would remain unrequited for the time being.

"Lady Katarina, are you all right? Are you still feeling unwell after all?" asked Ginger. Apparently, while these thoughts were churning in my head, my silence had caused her to worry about me again.

Ginger was so clever and so kind that I had always been proud to call her my school friend. If possible, I wanted to avoid blocking her path toward romance, but was I actually doing so in the first place? Did Ginger really want to be with Keith, like she did in the game? After all, though Keith in the game was a playboy, in reality he was a fine young man and pure of heart.

“I’m fine, I’m fine. Sorry for making you worry... By the way, Ginger, is there anyone you admire at the moment?” I thought it would be better to come out and ask her directly, rather than let this thought continue to swirl around in my head.

“Oh? Why do you ask, all of a sudden?” Ginger’s eyes widened.

I have to admit, she’s right. This is way too sudden. But I’d like to think that I’m checking out of consideration for Ginger.

“Well, after I fainted I had a dream. In that dream, there was a certain boy you admired. I thought that maybe that dream was prophetic.” *Even to me, that sounds ridiculous now that I say it.*

Ginger understandably looked dumbfounded at first. But then, after sighing deeply, she stated firmly, “Your dream could not have been further from the truth. There is no boy whom I admire.” Judging by the look in her eyes, she did not seem to be lying. Still, I wanted to be sure.

“Really? Are you sure?” I asked while moving closer to Ginger.

“I am certain. There is no such boy in my life... Though there is such a girl,” she answered. She muttered the last part under her breath, so I could not quite hear her. I did know, however, that she was not one to continue lying under such persistent questioning, so I felt reassured.

Because Keith didn’t turn out to be a playboy in reality, he must not be her type anymore. Hm, does that mean that playboys are Ginger’s type?! I can’t allow my precious junior to be ensnared by some creep.

“Ginger, do tell me if you ever find a boy you admire. As your older friend, I will inspect him thoroughly!” I declared, squeezing Ginger’s hand tightly. This apparently embarrassed her, because her cheeks turned slightly red.

“Are you my mother, Lady Katarina...? Still, thank you very much. If by some miracle that should ever happen, I will report it to you at once. But until then... Please stay by my side.” From Ginger, who was fundamentally so aloof, this was almost enough to floor me. My junior was too cute.

“Yeah, yeah. Until someone nice comes along, stay with me!” I was hugging Ginger tightly when suddenly someone grabbed my collar and pulled me away.

“Big sister, our carriage is ready. It’s time to go home.” Keith was the culprit who had peeled me away from Ginger, and he marched me straight to the carriage. I promised to meet my friends at the Magical Ministry the next day.

“Big sister, can I ask you to stop leading young students astray? What are we going to do if you accumulate any more followers?” complained Keith once we were in the carriage, accompanied by a sigh.

“What on earth do you mean, Keith? You’re probably just tired from working too much. Why not rest during the ride home?” I suggested.

Keith let out an even heavier sigh and paused before speaking again. “I’m fine. You’re the one who needs to relax, big sister. Your fever might flare up again. Have a little rest. Feel free to lean on me.” Keith then came and sat next to me before offering me his shoulder.

“I guess you’re right.” Without hesitation, I rested my head on his shoulder. After letting my body rest against his, which these days was much more muscular compared to when we were children, the feeling of drowsiness that I thought had subsided assaulted me once more. I even felt a little bit feverish again.

In no time at all, I slipped back into the land of dreams.

★★★★★★★

I, Keith Claes, looked over at my adoptive sister Katarina, sleeping peacefully with her head on my shoulder. I then let out a brief sigh. I felt conflicted. Should I rejoice at having earned Katarina’s trust as her adopted brother, or should I, as a man, lament the fact that she displayed no caution whatsoever around me?

I recalled the message I had suddenly received from my sister while I was busy with work at the manor. Its contents caused me to worry that she had stuck her nose into something dangerous yet again, so I headed straight to the Magical Ministry in a panic. Just as I expected, I found her about to involve herself more deeply in Marquess Randall’s affairs, despite being warned about him. At that moment, I felt my blood run cold. Perhaps I should have been glad that at the very least, she was not thinking of rushing in recklessly by herself this time. Though it may have been for the sake of her beloved school friend, Katarina was being rash once again.

She had acted in just the same way when I was the one in trouble. She led the initiative to rescue me from the darkness. The light I saw around her that day was still burned into my retinas.

Katarina could not leave someone who was in trouble alone. She was especially unable to stand by quietly when someone close to her was in a pinch. That was just the kind of person Katarina Claes was. And I could not help but adore her.

When I caressed Katarina's cheek as she dozed peacefully, I noticed that it was still a little bit warm. Although her fevers did tend to go away as soon as she slept, it was not as if she could immediately regain all of her energy. I would have to let her rest for today.

It did not happen so often lately, but when we were small, Katarina often suffered from fevers like this and fell into a deep sleep. The worst case of this apparently occurred the day she first met Jeord, after she fell outside the castle and hit her head, but even after that, she still had fevers from time to time.

Katarina always held my hand when I was awoken by nightmares in the days after I first arrived at Claes Manor, but when she herself was bedridden with a high fever, she would say, "I'm fine, Keith. Go get some rest," urging me to return to my room. When, in spite of this, I surreptitiously went to check on her, I heard her groan in her sleep and saw that she was shedding tears.

Watching the tears roll down her cheeks as she called out names I did not recognize, I felt a pang in my chest. Later, I tried looking up the names I had heard Katarina cry out, but no matter how hard I looked, I could find no record of any of them.

It was at that time that I first began to suspect that Katarina may be keeping a painful secret from me. Since then, I had waited for her to talk to me about it, but I wondered if that day would ever come. There were times when I worried that if she should run headlong into danger one day, just to help another person, I might lose her forever. After all, at crucial moments, Katarina tended to try and resolve problems by herself, without relying on others for help.

Almost ten years had passed since I made an oath to protect Katarina. I was no longer the powerless child I used to be.

"So feel free to depend on me, Katarina," I whispered in Katarina's ear, her head resting against my shoulder, before stroking her hair. A pleasant aroma wafted toward my face, leaving me feeling a bit dizzy. I had to admit, I had been better at sticking to my role as her adopted brother in the past. Since Katarina had told me that my confession had made her happy, things somehow had

not gone as I had hoped.

I found myself unable to control myself any longer and gently pressed my lips against her hair. Her scent grew stronger and I felt even more dizzy, but then a blond-haired, blue-eyed prince appeared in my mind's eye, and with raised eyebrows said, "Just what do you think you're doing to my fiancée while my hands are full?" Thus prompted, I was able to stop at the last second.

I shook my head to dispel the afterimage of the prince. I then went to stroke Katarina's head one more time, but I must have tickled her, as she drew herself even closer to my shoulder, leaving me deeply conflicted once more.

The cycle of my internal conflict and the occasional appearance of the prince continued until our carriage arrived at Claes Manor.

★★★★★★★

Thanks to the fact that I was able to sleep soundly in the carriage, by the time we arrived back at Claes Manor, my head was feeling much clearer.

After stuffing my face at dinner, I withdrew to my room feeling satisfied. *Now, I wonder if we'll manage to get into Fray's dormitory tomorrow? I also need to consider what my dream today revealed to me.*

Meeting chairwoman: Katarina Claes.

Meeting representative: Katarina Claes.

Meeting secretary: Katarina Claes.

"Now then, everyone. Let us pore over the information we learned in our dream today."

"Yes, ma'am. To our great surprise, Fray turned out to be the rival character for the Jeord route in *Fortune Lover II*."

"Wasn't that a surprise? I guess someone had to fill in the gap left behind by Katarina the villainess. She was just exiled from the kingdom, after all."

"If Katarina had thought more carefully about her actions, then her junior school friend might not have ended up as a rival at all."

"That's true. And it was not only Fray who ended up being a rival, but Ginger too. It's more than I can bear."

"But at the very least, it seems that Ginger does not secretly admire Keith, so we don't need to worry about that."

"I guess not. Looks like the education I gave Keith to stop him growing up to be a playboy paid off. Though we should still take

care to ensure that Ginger isn't taken in by some other weird playboy."

"I suppose you are right. Ginger would seem to be safe for now, but as for Fray..."

"Unlike in the game, Fray has become a girl with her own clear hopes and desires. But it's almost as if she is bound to the game's story, because she has still ended up as a candidate for engagement to Jeord."

"It's kind of like when we were condemned for Katarina's crimes, despite not having done anything. Still, thanks to our friends, we managed to get through that. Everyone is willing to help us once again. I'm sure it'll be okay."

"I suppose you are right. We shall *not* be bound by the game's story! First of all, Fray has not even imprisoned Maria, as she did in the game."

"Ah, that's right. Near the end of our dream, Fray, acting on Marquess Randall's orders, imprisoned Maria. She put her in the basement, didn't she?"

"Right, right. I could hardly believe that there was a basement underneath that mansion... Oh, we don't have one in our house, do we?"

"Though I do feel like Claes Manor at least has a pantry downstairs, from what we saw in the game, Randall Manor has a much more substantial basement."

"Fray in the game said she had been locked up down there in the past, so maybe the marquess just has a room for locking people up."

"Who has a room just for locking people up? That Marquess Randall is too scary."

"The more I hear about that man... Hm? A room for locking people up? Could it be that our Fray is in that basement right now?"

"Huh?!"

"Huh?!"

"You're so clever, Katarina Claes! He can't have too many rooms without any windows, where no one would hear you no matter how much noise you make!"

"Okay! Tomorrow, let's tell everyone that the marquess might have such a room."

"Roger that."

“Understood.”

And so, after I coincidentally remembered a useful piece of information, the mental meeting of the Katarinas came to a close.

“Fray, hang on a little bit longer,” I murmured before climbing into bed. This was no time for me to start overthinking, run another fever, and faint again. I needed to have a proper rest and let my body recharge completely.

Chapter 5: Rescuing Fray

When I woke up the next morning, my head was clear. I felt none of the sluggishness that I had the previous day. After I finished getting ready for the day as usual with help from Anne, Keith and I climbed into our carriage and we headed to the Magical Ministry.

Upon entering the room we had been borrowing since yesterday, I found that Larna, Sora, and Maria were already there.

"Good morning."

Once everyone had returned my greeting, Larna spoke up, "Prince Alan, Lady Mary, and Lady Sophia are going to be a little late. Ginger Tucker is standing by at the academy for us. It's well known that she and Fray are close, so I thought it would be better for her to avoid doing anything suspicious, lest we tip off Marquess Randall's people."

I was shocked to hear that Larna had thought things through so carefully before taking action. I also reflected once again that I was grateful to have someone so capable on my team.

"Sora, Lady Katarina. I'd like to hear your reports," said Larna.

Sora was the first to report. "I conducted an investigation of the dormitory used by Fray Randall, but there were no signs of anyone keeping watch there. I did, however, learn that Marquess Randall's men came to gather Fray's belongings a short while after she was called back to Randall Manor. There is a possibility that there is nothing left for us to use to track Fray."

What?! They've already picked up Fray's things?

"N-No way!" I cried out in despair.

In contrast, Keith accepted this with a calm expression and said, "I thought that might be the case. I cannot imagine that the marquess would deliberately leave something compromising in the room, and taking everything away is a quicker solution than dispatching men to watch it."

"B-But that means that there's no longer any point in going to Fray's dormitory." After all, if none of Fray's belongings remained, we would not be able to use the bear, and would have a hard time

pinpointing her location.

"No, Marquess Randall likely didn't remove all of her belongings. If his men gathered everything Fray required for day-to-day life, it would have added up to quite a lot. Also, since she is still enrolled at the academy, it would be difficult for him to do anything that might make it look like he had no intention of letting her return. After all, it is an absolute decree of our kingdom that anyone with magical powers must attend the academy," Larna pointed out.

"So there might be something left?"

Larna answered my question. "The chance of Randall's men leaving behind something they didn't think necessary to take back with them is high." Larna had to know far more about the Randall family than me. Whatever she had to say on the matter was probably correct. "Even so, we don't know whether there's anything we can use there, but it's worth having a look."

Having said that, Larna quickly rose to her feet and announced, "As I've finished my explanation and Lady Katarina and Master Keith have arrived, I will go with Maria, Alexander, and Ginger—who is already waiting nearby—to see if we can gain access to Fray's dormitory room." Alexander—the stuffed bear—popped out of Maria's bag at this moment. With Larna's involvement, things proceeded quickly.

"Lady Katarina, please wait here for the remaining members of our group. They should come here once they've gathered some more information about the Randall family."

Wow, so that's why the others are running late. They've been gathering information for us. Everyone, thank you...

"Your friends are all so capable; we can really count on them," added Larna, giving voice to my thoughts.

"Yes, ma'am." I nodded firmly. Larna then took Maria and gallantly departed the room. A short while after Larna and Maria had left, Mary and Alan arrived. They brought with them additional information about Marquess Randall. Alan also told us more about Jeord's present situation.

"Jeord continues to work with the servants sent by Marquess Randall breathing down his neck, but has managed to quietly do his job without anything appearing out of the ordinary. Just what I'd expect of him," reported Alan, though I wondered if Jeord might be overdoing it in spite of building up a lot of stress.

Even when Jeord was exhausted from pushing himself too hard, he managed to make it look as if nothing was wrong. He was good at making sure no one realized he was pushing himself too hard in the first place.

Because people referred to him as the perfect prince, Jeord must have felt unable to show any sign of weakness, or to rely on others for help. Under normal circumstances I would visit him and tell him to take a break, even a short one, but given the present situation, I could not do that.

"Prince Alan, the next time you see Prince Jeord, could you tell him to make sure he gets some rest?"

"I'm sure he already is. This is Jeord we're talking about." Though Alan no longer had an inferiority complex with respect to Jeord, as he had when they were small, he still thought of Jeord as his perfect big brother, and thus responded to my request with a look of befuddlement.

"Even so, please tell him," I reiterated to drive home the point.

"All right," agreed Alan with a nod. At any rate, Alan was obedient.

The additional information Mary had brought mostly concerned Marquess Randall's concubines and mistresses. Apparently, in high society, that sort of information was the easiest kind to gather.

Alan, for his part, had mainly focused on Marquess Randall's political role. We learned that the marquess had quite a lot of influence. While Alan was showing me the information he had collected, we heard another familiar voice.

"May we enter?"

"Come on in, Sophia," I called out. As Sophia entered the room, I saw that she was joined by Nicol, who had not attended the previous day.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be here yesterday; work got in the way. To make up for that, I've tried to bring plenty of information," began Nicol, before handing me a stack of notes.

"Whoa, this much?!" I could not help but exclaim in surprise when I saw the pile of papers crammed with Nicol's handwriting.

"My brother went all out for the first time in a while," boasted Sophia with a lively smile, but Nicol simply nodded, expressionless as ever.

I had always known that Nicol was capable, but after seeing how much information he had managed to gather in one day while

still doing his job, I realized just how amazing he was when he got serious. If I ever made an enemy of Nicol, I was certain that I would meet with a Bad End. I was glad to call him an ally instead.

I reflexively gulped while considering that possibility. As I did so, Nicol picked out a single sheet from his stack of papers. There was something like a blueprint drawn on that sheet of paper.

I wonder what this is.

"These are the blueprints for Marquess Randall's mansion," explained Nicol smoothly. Everyone else there, including me, stood frozen in shock.

"Um, wait a minute, Master Nicol. What are the blueprints for Marquess Randall's mansion doing here? Are those real?" inquired Keith, who was the first to recover from the shock.

"I can't tell you where I got them, but they are indeed real. However, these are from when the manor was first constructed, so if there have been any additions or renovations since then, they may no longer be completely accurate," answered Nicol indifferently.

"Is confidential information, like a family manor's blueprints, really so easy to get your hands on? What's going on in this kingdom?" Alan cradled his head in his hands.

"It was not easy. Even for me, obtaining this information was quite an ordeal. Also, there is really no one in the kingdom who can do such a thing besides my father, so there is no need to worry." Nicol once again sounded indifferent. He did not appear to be bragging—merely stating a matter of fact—but this only made him seem even more remarkable. "Incidentally, though I think you already know this, you must not say anything about these blueprints to anyone outside of our group. There is a chance that we will be caught."

After this final word of warning from Nicol, no one challenged him again. The scent of danger hung heavily over the room. Though his little sister Sophia gushed, "My big brother is so cool," I felt like telling her, "Sophia, cool doesn't quite sum up your brother's deeds."

However, I put all that to one side to focus on our present task of rescuing Fray. In all honesty, I felt really grateful to have these blueprints.

"Excuse me, Master Nicol, but does Marquess Randall's mansion have a basement?"

“A basement?”

“Yes. I have a feeling that, if the manor did have one, it would be handy for hiding people in.” If this was really just like the game’s world, then Marquess Randall must have one. Nicol lowered his gaze to study the blueprints. I looked over them as well, but couldn’t understand them at all.

“Look, it says that an area was excavated under here. Unless there were other basement rooms constructed later, there’s nowhere else it could be,” said Nicol, pointing smack-dab in the middle of the mansion. Of all things, the very center. If Fray was really being held underneath there, getting her out would be extremely difficult.

“You’re definitely right in saying that if she’s underground, it would be hard for anyone to notice that she’s there. But the fact that the basement is in the center of the mansion makes this tricky,” observed Keith. Everyone else agreed with him.

In the first place, the security around Marquess Randall’s mansion was reputed to be really tight. I started to feel discouraged.

Then I heard someone briskly announce, “We’re back.” Larna had returned, with Maria in tow.

“Erm, how did it go? Did you find anything?” I asked her, standing up without thinking. Larna grinned. *Does that mean…?*

“We did. We found something precious to Fray,” Larna confirmed.

“Yes. Here it is,” Maria chimed in happily. She then took something out of her bag.

“A handkerchief?” What Maria had brought was simply a white handkerchief, with no distinguishing features.

“Yes. According to Ginger, it was given to her by Lady Larna, and she has treasured it ever since. Our little bear even responded to it, so there is no doubt about it,” declared Maria.

As soon as she said this, the bear’s head popped up from behind her shoulder. He had a triumphant look on his face, as if to say, “I’m just too good.” Although the bear’s face annoyed me, I was still beyond grateful that they had found something of Fray’s.

“So you once gave Fray something. Is this true, Lady Larna?” I asked the woman herself.

“Once, in the past, when I met her at the Magical Ministry, her clothes were dirty, and I gave her the handkerchief so she could clean herself up. I never would have thought that she’d hold onto it for this long, much less treasure it so,” answered Larna, a

complicated expression on her face.

Fray held Larna in admiration without even knowing about her other identity. Larna really must have felt conflicted during those interactions.

"There appears to be a small piece of embroidery on the edge of Larna's handkerchief. However, it looks like Marquess Randall's men were unaware of this, assuming it was originally Fray's handkerchief, and left it where they found it. After all, most other everyday items, like Fray's towels and dresses, were also left behind," explained Maria.

It seemed that Marquess Randall's men had mostly left behind anything that did not look like it would inconvenience the marquess. Actually, they probably did not even consider the fact that Fray could have her own volition. In that case, they would not have even imagined that she owned anything precious to her.

"By the way, I only realized this after you showed me this handkerchief, but..."

If the handkerchief she got from Larna was really so important to her, Fray must seriously admire Larna. Still, even if Larna and I looked cool to her at first glance, if she actually came to work here she would see that Larna is strange in all sorts of ways. Though she is a dependable boss.

"Is it not?" finished Maria, seeking agreement from me.

"Ah, yeah, you're right," I reflexively replied to Maria, but in fact I hadn't actually been listening to what came before the question. When I looked over at Maria, she smiled, so I smiled in return.

"So the magical tool has already reacted to that handkerchief?" Keith asked Larna, changing the subject.

"Yeah, he's indicated Fray's location for us." As soon as Larna said this, the bear snapped into action, pointing in a particular direction. "Judging by this direction, there seems to be no doubt that he's pointing at Randall Manor. After this meeting, I'd like to take him closer to the manor so we can confirm this."

Yep. It's starting to look extremely likely that Fray is being held in Marquess Randall's mansion. It's a good thing something precious to Fray was still left for us to find.

I went on to show Larna and Maria the blueprints to the manor we weren't allowed to talk to anyone else about. Larna looked shocked, just like the rest of us had a short while ago, but she soon

collected herself and commended Nicol on his findings.

"If Fray is really being held in this basement, then rescuing her is going to be even harder than I thought." Larna placed a hand over her mouth and appeared to think deeply about our predicament. Of course even she would be worried. Just getting Fray out of one of the rooms on the mansion's perimeter would have been very difficult, but infiltrating a basement in the middle of the mansion would be far more challenging. "Yes. This calls for some of my experimental tools," decided Larna, after standing lost in thought for a while.

"Experimental tools?" I repeated.

"Yeah. I think I have just the tools for this mission. Once Alexander has confirmed that Fray is really in Randall Manor, I'll see if we can make use of them," Larna responded. Incidentally, Alexander was the name that Larna had given the bear. Though not even Maria—who we could perhaps call his owner—called him that.

So we were going to be dealing with more of Larna's magical tools. I wondered if we were going to be all right. When they were useful, they really were useful, but the useless ones were particularly useless. I felt a touch uneasy about the prospect.

But under the circumstances, we must understandably grasp at straws. I would be grateful for any tools Larna could lend us.

"Well then, I will go with Alexander to get confirmation." Having accepted the information we had gathered and once again accompanied by Maria, Larna gallantly left the room. She really was a proactive woman. Having her cooperation was a huge help.

Those of us left in the room went over the information we had on the Randall family once more and discussed just how we intended to go about rescuing Fray.

"Marquess Randall knows full well that he has a lot of enemies, so the security around his manor is particularly tight," remarked Nicol.

"First of all, we have to figure out how to actually get inside," mused Alan, furrowing his brow.

"Even if we manage to get Fray out of there, we face the problem of what to do after that." This statement from Keith caused me to tilt my head in confusion.

"What do you mean 'after that'? We just need to make sure that she isn't taken back there again, don't we?"

“Big sister, things will not be so simple. Marquess Randall is sure to mount a desperate search for the daughter he tried to prop up as a potential fiancée for a prince, and if he should learn that she’s with us, he will very likely accuse us of kidnapping her. He’ll probably say that you were jealous of her, big sister.”

Oof, I have the awful feeling that Keith is right.

“Marquess Randall is an expert at using the people in his faction to spread rumors. It is certainly possible that he might deploy them in that way,” agreed Mary.

“He’s a merciless man, that Marquess Randall. I hardly think that he will just slink away if things don’t go his way,” said Alan, screwing up his face.

What a troublesome foe we face.

“Duke Claes may occupy a higher standing in society, but the strength of Marquess Randall’s faction supporting His Highness, Prince Jeffrey, is also great. And many of them are adept at making backroom deals. Even Duke Claes would have a hard time opposing the marquess,” Nicol pointed out. I felt quite disheartened at that point.

I had in fact briefly thought to myself that, given my high social standing, I would be fine no matter what happened. But the truth was that we were dealing with someone at the head of a large and powerful faction. To be more precise, it was Jeffrey’s faction. I could not afford to cause trouble for my father as a result of my own independent actions.

“The only one who might be able to hold back Marquess Randall is the house of Duke Berg, whose faction is of a comparable size,” continued Nicol. My head snapped back up upon hearing this.

“By the house of Duke Berg, you mean Selena’s family, right?”

“Yeah. Duke Berg is related to the queen, and as Prince Ian’s guardian, he is at the center of the faction supporting him. He is therefore entirely opposed to Marquess Randall. But although Marquess Randall has spread all kinds of rumors about Duke Berg, the duke is so powerful that he hardly needs to pay any attention to the marquess. Duke Berg may be the one person that Marquess Randall can’t do anything about.”

Really? I had no idea that Selena’s father was so amazing. Selena herself is pretty quiet, so I didn’t think her father would be so formidable. Hmm, does that mean…?

“So if we tell Duke Berg about Fray, he might be able to do

something to help us?" I asked Nicol, prompting him to raise an eyebrow.

"He certainly could, but what reason would there be for House Berg to take custody of a daughter of House Randall?"

"You might be right, but I will still try asking, as a friend."

"A friend?" Nicol sounded puzzled.

"Yes. I'll ask my friend Selena."

Back when I attended the Academy of Magic, I found myself caught up slightly in a conspiracy involving Jeffrey's faction. I was kidnapped and held in a house separated from Duke Berg's main residence. At that time I became quite friendly with Ian's fiancée, Selena, and we had kept in touch ever since.

Selena always said that she would like to repay the debt she felt she owed me—from the time I was kidnapped—and I had even heard that Duke Berg had said the same thing. Although I had never met the duke.

Therefore, though I felt guilty for doing so, I thought of asking this favor of Selena as repayment for that debt.

When I told Nicol about this, Mary murmured, "I knew that you had kept in touch with Lady Selena since that incident, but I had no idea that she felt so indebted... It looks like I failed to gather enough information. How careless of me." Her shoulders slumped.

With a look of exasperation, Alan added, "So that's how Selena saw things... I guess I shouldn't be surprised; you never miss a chance to profit from your misfortune."

"Exactly what I would expect from Lady Katarina," chimed in Sophia, looking at me with her eyes sparkling.

Sora shrugged slightly, but what was I supposed to gather from that?

Incidentally, Keith knew all about this already, so without showing any particular signs of surprise, he intoned, with a far off look in his eyes, "How like my big sister."

"However, under those circumstances, we might actually get Duke Berg to take custody of Fray. You really are amazing, Katarina," finished Nicol with a gentle smile.

Uwa... This was the first time I had seen Nicol's devilish smile in quite some time, so it left me dizzy for a moment. On top of that, he had praised me, so I couldn't help but blush a little bit.

"W-Well then. I will try and contact Selena at once."

"Yeah, please do."

I summarized my request to Selena in a letter and sent it off. We returned to our discussion about the most suitable way to rescue Fray, and what to do about any guards we encountered on the way.

"We're back," came a clear voice. Larna then walked back into the room, once again with Maria in tow. "Now that we've had confirmation from Alexander, there is no doubt in my mind: Fray is being held inside Randall Manor." Now that she was certain, Larna sounded almost cheerful as she announced this.

"I thought as much," I replied. Just as I predicted. If we were going to rescue Fray, specifying her location was the most important thing.

"Still, that was very quick. Is Randall Manor close to the Ministry?" I asked Larna, as she really had managed to go there and come back surprisingly quickly.

"I went to a driver known for his swiftness and told him we were in a hurry," revealed Larna. Behind her, I could see that Maria's face looked a little green, so they really must have traveled at quite a speed. *Good job, Maria.*

"Though I am glad that we have confirmed Fray's location, the security around Marquess Randall's manor is formidable, is it not? How are we supposed to get to Fray and escort her out of there?" Nicol inquired of Larna.

"If we make proper use of my experimental magical tools, I don't think we'll have any trouble doing that." Holding her head high, Larna exuded confidence.

"By magical tools, do you mean the ones you were talking about earlier?" asked Nicol.

"Yeah. Though they're still only prototypes, come and have a look, everyone," invited Larna, before leading us all to the room where these magical tools were kept. I felt a bit apprehensive about going to the magical tool storage room, which was littered with magical tools that had yet to be tested, but we were taken to another room entirely.

Still, upon entering the room I saw rows of unfamiliar tools. *Are we really going to be okay?* Out of the collection of tools that kind of looked like junk, Larna took a single item in hand. It looked a bit like a compact for makeup.

"If you take this and do this..." began Larna. When she opened the compact and operated it somehow, a dazzling flash of light

enveloped her body. It was so bright that I reflexively shut my eyes. When I opened them again...

"Huh, Lady Larna?" Larna, who was just standing right in front of me, had suddenly vanished. *Hey, what's going on? Don't tell me she just teleported away? Has a super-powered tool like that already been developed?!* That's what I thought.

"I'm right here." However, I could hear Larna reply from the same spot where she had been standing a moment earlier.

"Huh? Lady Larna, are you still there?" Apparently, she had not just teleported.

"I'm exactly where I was before. You just can't see me anymore."

"Can't see you?!" *Does she mean that she just turned invisible?!*

"That's right. By refracting light around me, I created an illusion...though I needn't go into too much detail. In short, this tool makes its user invisible." After Larna said this, there was another brilliant flash of light, and as soon as I could see again, Larna was standing right there in front of me.

"A-Amazing. With this, we can sneak into any place we want," I exclaimed in jubilation.

Larna immediately burst my bubble. "Hold your horses... What I mean to say is that there's a trick to using this tool effectively. You can't use it unless you constantly channel magical energy into it. This naturally limits the number of people who can use it."

"So we can't use it, then?"

"Most of the members of our team can. We have many skilled people with strong magic."

In other words, the only one who couldn't use the tool was me. Although, actually, it was fair to say that Sora's magic wasn't very strong either.

"But if we can use it, we can get into Randall Manor, can't we?"

"No, I don't think it will be that simple. This tool can only conceal your appearance. It cannot eliminate the noise you make. Though you may be able to make it inside a less protected manor, if the guards at Randall Manor are worth their salt, they will notice anything out of the ordinary, including footsteps," answered Larna.

I could hardly believe that there was still a chance of being discovered, even if we made ourselves invisible. In fact, if even becoming invisible wasn't enough to get us inside, didn't that make the whole operation impossible? Everything started to seem

hopeless.

"That's where this comes in," said Larna, pulling out a second magical tool. It looked like some kind of stick made out of...black rubber? *Hmmm, where have I seen this before? Ah, that's right! There was one in my grandma's bathroom in my past life. She told me that she would use it to unclog the toilet. That's what it is! I can't remember the name, but it was exactly that shape.*

What does this mean? Why would Larna bring out something for unblocking toilets at a time like this?

"This tool uses Wind Magic to suck up any sound generated nearby. I made this some time ago with a faint sense of mischief. Without any real opportunities to use it, I ended up leaving it here, but it looks like it might be helpful now."

I was still not quite clear when a tool that sucked up the noise around it might be useful. *Wait, could it be useful during this mission?!*

"The only thing is that this also requires its user to channel magic into it to be active, so only someone with strong magic can use it effectively. There's another catch: the area over which it picks up sound must be adjusted by magic. Just like the tool that makes you invisible, there's a trick to using it."

In other words, someone who could use the tool that made you invisible would have to travel together with someone who could use the tool that erased sound. I had asked all of my friends to help me, but if things were going to turn dangerous, then I did not feel that I could still ask them to take part.

As I was considering this, Keith said, "In that case, could you please tell me how to use that tool?"

"Huh, Keith?" I looked at Keith in surprise.

"Since you'll end up going yourself no matter what, big sister, I'll have to go as well. Besides, despite how I might look, my magic is strong and I'm relatively skilled, so I think I'll be able to use a magical tool," asserted Keith, smiling broadly.

"Thank you, Keith."

"Lady Katarina, I will also accompany you. My magic is quite strong too, and I think I am more skilled than most. I am often told that I am physically fit as well."

"Hey, Mary, I don't think you should say that. Ah... Incidentally, my magic is also strong, and I am fairly skilled," added Alan.

“Lady Katarina, I have read many works of spy fiction from cover to cover, so please let me go with you.”

Mary, Alan, and Sophia all offered to help me. I could scarcely believe how reliable my friends were. However...

“No, it won’t do for young noblewomen with no relevant experience, much less a prince, to infiltrate the home of a marquess,” Larna stated firmly.

I thought to myself that virtually no young noblewomen had infiltrated the home of a marquess before—though Jeord was a prince, and we had once sneaked into a mansion full of rogues—but I decided not to mention this to the others.

None of the three whom Larna had rejected made any objection, simply nodding with looks of regret on their faces.

As a dejected atmosphere settled over them, with a resolute look in her eyes, Maria said, “I will go with you, in place of the others. I have already received permission from Lady Larna.”

“Lady Larna gave you permission?” *When did she receive that?*

As if reading my mind, Larna said, “When we went to check Randall Manor, we started talking about this very subject, and I gave her my permission. In the unlikely event that Fray has been injured, it would be reassuring to have Maria with us. Besides, there is a possibility that Marquess Randall has become involved in Dark Magic. The more people we have who can deal with that, the better.”

Marquess Randall may be messing with Dark Magic... I certainly wouldn’t put it past him.

“So at that time, I did think that it would be best if you were to come as well, Katarina... But it sounds like you planned on going from the very start,” continued Larna. Her eyes were calm.

“Yes, of course I did. After all, I was the one who suggested going in the first place. Besides, I have Pochi with me, so I can defend myself,” I responded, holding my head high.

The expression on everyone else’s face told me that they had expected me to go from the beginning. In fact, they had been discussing the mission under the assumption that I would be going.

“Good. Well then, Lady Katarina, and her little brother. We’ve also decided that Miss Maria is going. Sora, you seem to have the most experience in these matters. Can I ask you to come with as well?”

In response to Larna’s question, Sora nodded firmly. “Yes,

ma'am. I thought things would end up like this from the beginning, so I have no objections."

So Sora, who had come with me that time I had gone to rescue Keith, would also be joining us this time. That was very reassuring.

In fact, now that I thought about it, this was more or less the same lineup we'd had that time. Although on that occasion, Jeord had been with us. When I thought about how I had convinced a prince to break into a den of thieves, I felt apologetic. But this time, Jeord was not around to help me. Without Jeord, who always took the lead without a second thought, I felt a little bit worried. As I was thinking about that, another one of my friends spoke up.

"Please allow me to join your party." Everyone turned to look at the speaker.

"Huh, Master Nicol?" I had to double-check that this unexpected show of support was serious. Although Nicol was incredibly capable, how should I put it...? He was not the type to take action out in the open, but rather to direct others from behind the scenes. I did not think of him as being suitable for active duty. I figured he disliked that sort of thing. Apparently everyone had thought the same way, because they all looked shocked.

But Nicol did not flinch. "The truth is that I owe Fray Randall a personal debt. I want to take this opportunity to repay her," he stated.

"You are acquainted with Fray, Master Nicol? You never served together on the student council," I pointed out in confusion.

After a moment of silence, Nicol responded, "There was a bit of a get-together for present and past members. On that occasion, she gave me some advice." It didn't look like he intended to go into more detail. However, just what kind of advice could Fray have given Nicol?

"What sort of advice?"

Nicol remained silent. He really had no intention of speaking any further on the subject.

"Good. If I'm not mistaken, Nicol Ascart, your element is wind. That would make you compatible with this noise sucker. I did think it would be too much to expect Miss Maria to use a tool while also using her Light Magic, but if you'll come as well, that would be a big help." So Larna had already given that stick that looked like it was meant to unblock toilets a weird name.

In a low voice, Mary muttered, "If you needed more people,

why not ask me?" with her lips pouted for effect.

A lot was happening to divide my attention, but one question weighed on my mind more than anything else.

"Does this mean that you will not be coming with us this time, Lady Larna?" Having Larna with us when we went to save Keith was so reassuring. She had saved our bacon a number of times since then, so I had just assumed we would have her with us again this time. I thought that having her with us would make this mission easier.

"Hmm. I did wonder whether I should go, but I decided it would be best for me to support you in another way. So I'll need everyone else to lend their support," announced Larna, before describing just how everyone else could support us.

Apparently people often came to Randall Manor to voice their complaints. Marquess Randall was just that prolific when it came to harming others, but he had used his money and influence to threaten such people and bury their complaints.

Larna then said that we were going to issue several such complaints as part of our strategy. In fact everyone in our group not going to rescue Fray directly would go and complain at the same time. Although this would be shocking for any other household, in House Randall's case, such a volume of complaints was not unthinkable.

I worried that going to complain to the marquess directly would be even more dangerous than sneaking into the mansion, but Larna said that if those who went to complain confidently stated their names and positions in society, this should actually be safer for them. She stated that Marquess Randall could not lay a finger on anyone with a definite social standing.

Therefore, Mary's party would go to Randall Manor to issue the complaint that we suspected the marquess of spreading rumors about me. It was public knowledge that Mary and the others were close friends of mine, so Larna had judged that it would not be suspicious for them to issue such a complaint on my behalf.

When asked whether she could perform such a duty, Mary answered, "You would like me to issue a complaint about the strange rumors that have been spread about Lady Katarina, correct? I am very used to that sort of thing. In fact, I would say I am an expert."

I decided not to think too hard about how she became used to

doing that, let alone an “expert.” At any rate, while Mary was brimming with enthusiasm, behind her, Alan looked bewildered.

“Though this will be my first time issuing such a complaint, I will do my best. I will thoroughly consult an encyclopedia of complaints before taking on this challenge,” promised Sophia, clenching her fists. This seemed to leave Alan even more bewildered, and her brother simply stared off into the distance.

“Very well. I’m counting on Mary’s group to fulfill that role. I’ll do everything I can on my end to sow confusion throughout House Randall. I want Katarina’s group to take that opportunity to gain entry to the mansion.”

I bowed my head deeply in answer to Larna’s orders. It really was reassuring to have her help. Until she got involved, I had no idea what we should do, but before I knew it, we had come up with a plan to sneak into the mansion and rescue Fray.

“Lady Larna, I am so grateful for your help,” I declared.

Larna opened her eyes wide, before saying quietly, so that only I could hear her, “I should be thanking you. Thank you for going to these lengths for Fray, who is practically a stranger to you. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to help save her, when I was too foolish to realize what was going on myself.” Larna looked almost as if she was about to cry, which caused me to feel a pang in my chest. Larna must have a lot to deal with herself.

In the end, Keith practiced using the tool that could make us invisible and Nicol practiced using the noise sucker.

Although Larna had told us that these tools were difficult to handle, they soon mastered them, as expected of these high-spec young men. Therefore, we decided to carry out our operation the very next day.

In the first place, we were anxious not to give Marquess Randall too much time to think about what to do with Fray, or to let him discover our intentions, so we would execute our plan as soon as possible.

After we all decided to begin by meeting at the Magical Ministry tomorrow, Keith and I went home.

As always, once I arrived home, I had dinner with my family, then went to get ready for bed. While I was getting ready, I happened to look out the window and see someone unfamiliar entering the mansion.

In a panic, thinking that Marquess Randall must have discovered our strategy and sent someone to stop us, I ran out of my room and toward the front door. By the time I got there, I found that the visitor I spied through the window was already being taken through to our drawing room.

If this was really someone from Marquess Randall's camp, I had to think of an excuse. However, still without anything to say for myself, I found myself standing right in front of him.

Though the man's clothes were of fine quality, his hair and his eyes were a muted brown color. On top of that, his face was very ordinary, with no particularly noteworthy features. His appearance was such that, if I met him at a social gathering, I am sure that I would forget him soon after.

From his expression, the man acted strangely surprised to see me, even though this was surely our first meeting. I was convinced that I had no memory of his face. I did, however, recognize something in his expression. There was something very familiar about the look in his eyes as he stared back at me.

It took me a moment to realize. "Prince Jeord," I murmured. Once I said this, the man opened his eyes wide, looking even more shocked than he had a moment ago.

After a moment of silence, he asked, "How did you know?" His voice was unmistakably Jeord's.

"So it is you, Prince Jeord," I confirmed with a smile.

Jeord touched his own face and, after turning to look at the servant behind him, wondered "Did my disguise fall off?"

The servant shook his head definitively and answered, "No, Your Highness, it is perfect."

I see, so his unusual appearance was a disguise. He's trying to do the same thing Larna and Raphael have done.

Jeord paused again, then declared, "I did not think that you would be able to tell it was me, given my appearance." It seemed that I had somehow managed to hurt his feelings. I felt apologetic.

"Um, I could not tell at a glance. It was only when you looked at me and I saw your expression that I thought, 'Aha, it's Jeord.'" I desperately tried to smooth things over. This time, Jeord looked down and covered his face with his hands.

Oh shoot, I've discouraged him even more!

"Um, but I think it's a wonderful disguise. I would not have been able to tell without getting a close look." I decided to keep

trying to raise his spirits again, but when Jeord took his hands away from his face and looked up again, there was a smile on his face. "Huh?!"

"Please excuse me. It was not that I felt discouraged after you saw through my disguise. In fact, I choked up at the thought that you immediately recognized me despite how much I changed my appearance."

I needed a moment to think about this. "Um, as long as you do not feel discouraged, I am happy."

I totally thought that I had discouraged him, and started to fret. Hm, but in the first place...

"What brings you to my home at this hour?" I asked, voicing my most fundamental question.

Jeord blinked briefly before answering. "Erm, well, Alan told me about what you plan on doing tomorrow, so I became concerned about you, Katarina. Even if only for a short while, I wanted to see you and talk to you... At this hour, the servants Marquess Randall sent to watch me let their guard down, so I was able to put on this disguise and slip away." This was unusually inarticulate coming from Jeord.

I summarized his explanation: "In other words, you came because you were worried about me?"

Jeord hesitated again. "I suppose I was. Also, having had no chance to meet with you in a while, I just wanted to see your face." After he said this, a hint of red crept across Jeord's cheeks.

Jeord had been living under constant surveillance from Marquess Randall's men, while doing his best not to let others see how much this had exhausted him. He was probably almost at his limit. I guess Jeord felt the need to portray the perfect prince, perhaps because everyone already saw him that way. That must have been tough.

I gently placed my hand on Jeord's head and stroked his hair, which was a different color than usual. I hoped to myself that this would relieve his fatigue, even just a little bit.

"Katarina..." gasped Jeord after a moment.

"Hold on, big sister. Who's this? You mustn't do such things with people you don't know." Keith and my mother rushed over after admonishing me.

"Oh! Keith, this man is—" Before I could tell him that our visitor was actually Jeord, Keith yanked me away and stepped

between us. He then glared at Jeord threateningly.

"I do not know you are or where you are from, but please refrain from touching my sister so unreservedly."

No, Keith, I was the one touching him.

"Ah... Your little brother is overprotective, as always." Jeord frowned.

Upon hearing his voice, Keith looked startled. "Th-That voice... Prince Jeord?!"

"Indeed. To avoid creating any more of a commotion at home, I came in disguise. Therefore, would you please return my fiancée to me?"

"By no means. Now that I know it is you, Prince Jeord, I feel even less like letting you near my sister."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what it sounds like."

Jeord and Keith continued to go at it with smiles on their faces. I was happy to see that Jeord seemed to have been relieved of some of the tiredness on his face. Perhaps seeing a trusted childhood friend had raised his spirits.

"Ahh... I came here thinking that I would finally have a chance to speak with Katarina, even for a little while, but in the course of this pointless argument, it seems that I have already run out of time," grumbled Jeord after his exchange with Keith, sincere displeasure obvious behind his words.

"Oh? Are you leaving so soon?" It felt like Jeord had only arrived about a quarter of an hour ago.

"Unfortunately, I am still under close surveillance... I can hardly spend any time outside the castle. I came tonight thinking that I would be happy to get a glimpse of you, Katarina." Jeord furrowed his brow.

He must be so tired...

"Katarina, please take the utmost care tomorrow," added Jeord with a serious look in his eyes.

I nodded, then declared, "I will. I shall rescue Fray safely and put an end to your discomfort, Prince Jeord."

After opening his gorgeous eyes wide for a moment, Jeord narrowed them again and smiled. As he went to leave, he said the following to Keith: "Please do your utmost to protect Katarina in my stead."

"Even without you telling me, I had every intention of doing

so," answered Keith.

Jeord nodded briefly, then left, saying that there was no need for us to see him off. Still, I watched from behind as he departed into the night. As I did so, I uttered the following words in my heart for Jeord: "Just hold on a little longer. I'm sure I'll be able to return your life back to normal."

Tomorrow would finally be the day that we would put Operation Rescue Fray into action.

★★★★★★★

When I woke up the next day, the sky was heavy with clouds. This made it difficult to feel enthusiastic about the day ahead. Even if I could not have a perfectly cloudless day, I would have hoped for finer weather than this.

Hmmm. At least there doesn't seem to be rain. If our clothes got wet, it might have been harder for us to mask our presence when we went to sneak into the mansion.

As always, Anne helped me to get ready for my day. Then Keith and I headed to the Magical Ministry, where we had arranged to meet everyone else. After gathering in the same room we had used yesterday, we discussed the finer details of our mission plan one last time.

"Now then, everyone. I want you to do your best to avoid taking unnecessary risks. The moment things seem dangerous to you, pull out immediately," ordered Larna. Everyone nodded before boarding separate carriages. The plan was for the members of our team to arrive at our destination at staggered intervals.

Keith, Maria, Sora, Nicol, and I made up the unit that would execute the rescue. Because we would be infiltrating the mansion covertly, we would move last. After arriving at an inconspicuous location near Randall Manor, we would wait for Larna's signal to move in.

Mary, Sophia, and Alan would march boldly up to the front door of the manor. Larna said that she would be acting independently, so perhaps she was already going to be inside. Also, though she said she would give us a signal, we had no idea what it would be. Was she going to send up a flare or something?

Thus we proceeded to an inconspicuous location with a view of Randall Manor. After looking at the sky above the estate for a

while, we suddenly heard a tremendous *bang*, and saw that fireworks had been launched above Randall Manor.

"Huh?! Don't tell me *fireworks* are the signal!" I blurted out without thinking, shocked by the display.

After pausing for a moment, Keith answered, "That must be it," confirming my suspicions with a distant look in his eyes. The other three also seemed to be at a loss for words.

Regardless of the signal's unexpected nature, we had received it, so it was time to take action. Using the magical tool he had borrowed, Keith made us all invisible. We then headed toward Randall Manor.

This invisibility tool allowed the users within its field of effect to see each other, which was incredibly convenient. It was hard to explain, but it seemed to make everything within a specified area invisible to anyone outside of that area. If we had found ourselves unable to see each other, it would have been difficult to move around, so this tool's effect was just perfect.

The only drawback was that if anyone stepped outside of the field of effect, they would immediately become visible again, so we had to be careful. For that reason, we formed a neat line before proceeding.

From time to time, there was another *bang*, and another pretty firework bloomed in the sky above Randall Manor. *Come on, Larna, just how many fireworks are you planning on setting off?*

Thanks to the distractions provided by Larna and by Mary's group, the inhabitants of Randall Manor seemed to be extremely rattled as we entered. Even the guards at the back entrance seemed to be nervous about the unexplained fireworks and did not notice our invisible group slip past. We had cleared the first hurdle.

"Hey, what's with all the fireworks?"

"The young lady is here today. She must be up to her old tricks."

"Ah, well, I wouldn't put it past her."

I overheard some of the servants remark on the commotion. Just what kind of perception did people around here have of Larna, if *this* did not surprise them?

And so, with the servants all flustered, we passed by unnoticed, unseen, and without making a sound.

Nicol, Sora, Maria, Keith, and I all walked in single file, with Nicol at the head of our group. He held the bear, who pointed the

way for us. We drew closer and closer to the center of the mansion. Our prediction that we would find Fray being held in the basement underneath the middle of the mansion seemed more and more likely to be correct.

"Hey, those ladies from the houses of Hunt and Ascart are no joke. Even the most seasoned servants are having a hard time with those miscreants."

"Really? From a distance, they both looked like lovely young ladies to me."

"In terms of appearance, they are. But it seems that once they open their mouths they are both formidable. It looks like it will be a prolonged battle. A message has been passed around saying that we all need to watch ourselves around them."

"Huh... I guess looks can be deceiving."

Now we had information about Mary and Sophia. It sounded like they were both giving this their best effort. I resolved to do my best too, as we proceeded deeper into the mansion.

However, this was different from the time I had sneaked into a house of thieves. If we were discovered by the residents of this mansion, we would find ourselves in major trouble. There was a real danger of bumping into anyone we came across here. Although we could not be seen, it was not as if our bodies no longer had physical form, so this was still possible. If that did happen, even the servants would suspect that something was amiss.

To avoid that, Nicol used the magical tool he had received in combination with his Wind Magic to gather sound from our surroundings. When a resident of the mansion approached, he deftly motioned for our group to stop before guiding us to one side of the corridor. The corridors in Randall Manor, like the house as a whole, were excessively wide, so this was enough to prevent unwanted collisions.

I do not think this would have gone so smoothly if Nicol had not been with us. With that in mind, I was really glad that he had volunteered to come along. Though we had many near misses along the way, we continued to move forward in the direction indicated by the bear, heading for the center of the mansion.

Finally, the bear pointed at a particular door. Somehow, the look on his face communicated "She's in here."

After Nicol carefully checked our surroundings to make sure no one else was around, he placed one hand on the door. I thought that

it might be locked, but it opened easily.

Once we had all hurried inside, we inspected our surroundings and found that we seemed to be in some kind of guest room. On the right side of the doorway there was a sofa along with a desk and chair. A bed had been placed on the other side of the room. In the middle of the wall opposite the door was a bookcase, which was not particularly large.

Everything pointed to this being a room that a guest might spend the night in. We had such rooms at Claes Manor as well. Although, I did think that it was unusual to have such a room in the middle of a mansion like this. At home, rooms like this tended to be situated away from the heart of the mansion.

While I was mulling this over, Nicol, our leader, strode straight into the room. After seeming to come to a realization, he started moving the bookcase. Because he was still using his magical tool, it made no sound, but I was sure that without it, the bookcase would have made quite a rumbling sound as it slid across the floor.

As we all goggled at Nicol's unexpected act, a second door was revealed behind the bookcase.

You find these all the time in this otome game, Fortune Lover*! A hidden room!*

Without hesitation, Nicol opened the door and stepped inside. Although we felt slightly worried, we all followed him.

The hidden door opened into a short corridor. Even this corridor was wide enough that two people could walk in opposite directions without brushing against each other. At the end of the corridor was a staircase heading downstairs.

Maybe it leads to the basement I saw in my dream.

Nicol stopped in front of the stairs and took out the paper and pen he had brought to communicate in an emergency. After scratching out some letters on the paper, he turned it toward the rest of us. The paper read: "There are people down there. Probably two of them."

Perhaps one of the two was Fray, but who might the other person be? I felt my heart pounding. I nodded at Nicol, and after nodding back at me, he began to carefully descend the stairs, moving more slowly than he had a moment earlier. As we descended the stairs, our surroundings started to grow a little dimmer. Thanks to our magical tools, we were still hidden and still made no sound.

Under these circumstances, I did not think we would be discovered even if we went downstairs, but if Fray really was one of the two people in the basement, we were going to have to take her with us. It was surely going to be impossible to do that without the other person noticing.

A faint light appeared at the end of the dim staircase. There apparently wasn't any door at the base of the stairs. When we reached the bottom of the staircase, there was another short corridor connected to a room, just like we had encountered upstairs. We went toward the room, the source of that faint light.

"Fray?! Sarah?!" I thoughtlessly blurted out. Luckily, my voice was sucked away by Nicol's magical tool, so this was not overheard. Thanks to Nicol, it looked like neither of them had noticed us yet.

Exactly as we had expected, Fray, the one we were looking for, was in the room. What was completely unexpected was the presence of the black-haired woman Sarah.

Sarah, who had been used in the Dark Magic experiments undertaken by House Dieke and was later set free, seemed to have fallen into someone else's clutches. She was apparently still involved in Dark Magic.

After hearing her story, I had hoped to have an opportunity to speak to her properly, but so far this had not happened. However, given that Sarah was here... I looked at Fray steadily. Fray was lying down on a simple bed with her eyes closed. A thin black mist was coiled around her body.

Although the mist was not as dark as it had been when Keith was subjected to something similar, Dark Magic was without a doubt at work here. Keith had been left debilitated by that spell to the point where I had feared for his life.

It looked like the same thing might be about to happen to Fray. When I turned around to look at Sora, I saw that his expression had stiffened. He had realized the same thing.

We could not afford to sit around and wait, lest Fray end up beyond saving. I leaped past the line our group had formed and ran to Fray's side. It was not as if Sarah's presence did not worry me, but my fear that Fray might die if we left her in this condition was stronger. The very thought prevented me from standing still.

I now stood at the side of the bed. Sarah, who had been gazing down at Fray with cold eyes, looked shocked by my sudden appearance.

“Y—” Sarah was about to shout something, but she was cut short as her voice was sucked away by Nicol’s tool.

I jumped onto the bed where Fray was lying without delay. I extended a hand toward the black mist surrounding her, but found that I could not touch it.

That’s right! It won’t work with things the way they are.

“Pochi,” I called, summoning my familiar. In answer to my wish, Pochi leaped out of my shadow. As soon as he appeared, I was able to touch the mist surrounding Fray. *Good, it’s as I thought.* Like when I had found Keith in this condition, I was able to reach into the mist. Once I had a hold of it, I was able to tear it away from Fray, just like clumps of dust one might find on the floor. Even I was a little taken aback by how easy it was to peel away. Once I had removed it all, I spoke to Fray, as I had done after rescuing Keith.

“Fray, Fray,” I cried out as I picked Fray up and held her. Her eyelids, which had been so tightly shut, fluttered briefly before she slowly opened her eyes. “Fray, are you okay?” I looked directly into Fray’s eyes, which were still bleary and vacant of any expression.

A moment passed before Fray responded, “I can’t believe you really came to save me.” She spoke quietly, but she sounded happy and smiled before closing her eyes again.

“Fray?!” I panicked and tried to wake her up again, but all I heard in response was her gentle breathing as she slumbered. Slowly, I lowered her back down onto the bed.

Maria then came to Fray’s bedside and cast her Light Magic over her before saying, “She does not seem to have any serious injuries.”

Hearing that was at least something of a relief. I finally turned around to look at Sarah to see that she had been restrained. My reliable friends had taken action for me.

“Sorry for acting without thinking again,” I apologized, bowing my head toward my friends.

“Under the circumstances... Well, it couldn’t be helped. If you hadn’t acted first, I might have done the same thing.”

“Me too.”

Sora and Maria, who remembered what happened with Keith, did not chide me.

Nicol said, “The outcome is that Fray Randall is now safe. No problems here.”

Everyone was so kind. Still, I would have to be more careful in the future. And so, once I had apologized to everyone, I turned to look at Sarah, who was being held down by Sora with her arms tied behind her with rope. Then Sarah looked in my direction and our eyes met.

"So we meet again," Sarah said indifferently. I felt uneasy about the fact that she did not seem to pay any attention to Sora or her restraints.

"Why did you use Dark Magic on Fray?" I asked her.

"Because I was asked to. The lord of this manor told me to make it so that his daughter would listen to him. But this girl has a strong will. She really put up a fight," Sarah answered coolly.

So Marquess Randall, frustrated by Fray's unwillingness to do what he told her, had asked for Dark Magic to be used on his own daughter. *What an awful person.*

"We don't want Fray to have to live with this terrible man any longer, so we've come to rescue her. We'll be leaving with her now," I announced to Sarah, grabbing Fray's hand as she continued to sleep.

"Do as you like," replied Sarah. "I've done what I was asked to do, so I don't care what happens next." Everyone looked shocked by this response. As soon as we saw that Sarah was here, everyone probably prepared themselves to engage in magical combat with her. I had thought the same thing at first.

However, when I dispelled the Dark Magic surrounding Fray, I was struck by just how easy it was. It did not feel like Sarah's usual magic. I had crossed paths with her a few times in the past, so I could tell. I did not get the sense that she had cast this spell in earnest.

Sarah, who had spent her life under the control of aristocrats, probably had not felt too enthusiastic about using Dark Magic on Fray after hearing how similar Fray's circumstances were to her own. At least, that was what I surmised.

So I was not really surprised by Sarah's nonchalant attitude in this situation. I even thought to myself, *Just as I expected.*

"What will you do? Would you like to come with us?" Before I knew what I was saying, I asked this of Sarah. I held out my hand toward her.

Sarah opened her eyes wide. She maintained that stunned expression for a few beats, before screwing her face up. "I really do

get the creeps whenever we meet."

"Huh? The creeps—"

"My job is done, so I'll be going home for the day," stated Sarah. At the same time, the unnatural darkness I had seen her summon before suddenly expanded around her.

"Huh? What's going on?"

Sora, who was restraining Sarah, cried out in confusion. Then the darkness that had engulfed Sarah vanished. Once our vision cleared, Sarah was nowhere to be seen.

"So that's why she didn't seem to put up much of a fight. She knew that she could escape easily at any time," mused Sora after a moment, holding the rope Sarah had left behind.

"She may have gone to inform Marquess Randall of our intrusion. Don't you think we should hurry up and get out of here?" fretted Keith.

"I don't think we need to worry about that. She didn't seem terribly enthusiastic about using Dark Magic on Fray either," I responded.

Maria opened her eyes wide in surprise. "Lady Katarina, how could you tell?"

"I've battled against her magic a few times now, so I've kind of developed a feel for it," I answered. Everyone else looked terribly shocked.

"Well. There is a lot to think about, but Keith is quite right. For now, we should make haste and leave. Putting aside the question of what the woman known as Sarah might do next, it is dangerous for us to linger here indefinitely," said Nicol. Everyone nodded their agreement and we started making preparations to leave.

Because Keith and Nicol were respectively using the invisibility and sound erasing tools, Sora ended up carrying the still-sleeping Fray. I expected him to take her in his arms, like a princess, but instead he gave her a piggyback ride. Apparently she would be easier to carry that way.

Once we had finished preparing, we sallied forth in the direction of the stairs, though we proceeded much more carefully as we returned to the first floor of Randall Manor.

We were cautious because we still thought that Sarah may have announced our presence, in which case Marquess Randall would have sent his guards, but we found no one waiting for us. It looked like our cover had not yet been blown as we returned to the wide corridors of the first floor.

Thanks to the efforts of Larna and Mary's group, the residents of Randall Manor still seemed to be in a frenzy. With irritated looks on their faces, the servants hurried to and fro. Perhaps due to the

ongoing emergency, they all walked near the middle of the wide corridor, so they were not at all aware of our group as we crept along one side of it.

Still, we knew we would be discovered if we bumped into anyone, so we proceeded with care. *Just a little farther, just a little farther*, I thought. As we neared the exit, we came face-to-face with a man who suddenly stormed into the corridor.

"How pathetic! You call yourselves servants of House Randall?" shouted the man. When the servants saw him, they swiftly withdrew toward the walls of the corridor. We immediately reacted and moved away before standing still in a spot where there were no servants. However, there were servants on either side of our group. They were so close that if either of them moved but an inch in our direction we would be found. It was a tense situation.

"Who does that daughter of mine think she is? Send her home at once, along with those ladies who came here to complain," spat the man in irritation.

"Excuse me, my lord, but those ladies are daughters of well-known families, so we cannot chase them away so easily," explained one of the servants nervously.

In response, the man stomped over to the servant and raised his arm. The hand came down with a mighty *whack* and the servant collapsed to the floor.

"Isn't it your job to do something about it? You dullard."

Still on the floor, the servant could only bow his head and say, "My deepest apologies," in a thin voice.

I felt like averting my eyes from the senseless violence taking place in front of me. *What a terrible man.*

"If you understand your duty, then get to work, you dullards!" ranted the man. The servants all shuddered with terror before hurrying away in a panic. At that moment, one of the servants walked right in front of us. They just barely brushed against Sora, who had been rendered unable to move by our situation.

The servant had enough sense to realize that he had touched something in a place where there appeared to be nothing. "Huh, what the?!" He had a puzzled look on his face.

"Hey, dullard, what are you doing? Get moving!" shouted the nobleman after noticing the confused servant.

"Eek!" The servant let out a strangled cry. "Excuse me, my lord, but there seems to be—"

So this man was Marquess Randall. He fit the description I had been given exactly. *We're about to be discovered by the last person we want to find us. This is bad!* I assumed everyone else in our rescue squad was thinking the same thing.

"Are you showering your servants with violence and abuse yet again, Marquess?" There came a voice that was unsuitably calm under the circumstances, followed by a beautiful, dark-haired woman with a sultry air about her.

"Ugh, Susanna. You're *still* here?" seethed the marquess with a sour look on his face.

"My, my. Your daughter has come to visit her childhood home after all these years, and this is how you greet her? How very unwelcoming of you, Marquess," spoke the woman, Susanna Randall, with an elegant smile.

"What do you mean, daughter? After all the times you've disobeyed me, I no longer consider you my child. If you want me to think of you as such again, then marry Prince Jeffrey. Consider that a *fait accompli* and give me a grandchild at once," raged Marquess Randall, almost spitting out the words.

Susanna showed no sign of being bothered by this. She simply smiled. "I do not mind one bit if someone like you does not consider me his daughter. I must reject your offer."

Upon hearing this, Marquess Randall instantly turned bright red. Approaching Susanna, he raised his hand, just like he had done earlier with his servant. He truly seemed intent on hitting her. I gasped, but because of the noise erasing tool, I did not make a sound.

Susanna did not even flinch. With her gaze fixed steadily on the marquess, she declared, "If you hit me, a tool I carry to inform others of any threat to my safety will contact Prince Jeffrey. That may well be enough to cost you your position at the head of his faction." Her tone of voice was casual.

The marquess shuddered and stayed his hand a moment before it would have struck Susanna. He clenched his hands into fists. He paused, then spewed forth the following words: "Enough. Leave this house at once!"

"I see. Well then, I will give you one more gift in parting," said Susanna, before taking something like a bottle rocket out of her sleeve and launching it toward the center of the mansion. As the rocket zoomed past a number of servants, they all scattered in a

panic.

Marquess Randall turned even more red before shouting, “Stop fooling around, you pest! Hey, you dullards, do something at once!”

I thought I felt Susanna look in our direction after launching the firework. Could she have noticed us? Without having the chance to find out one way or the other, we took advantage of the commotion to flee and succeeded in escaping from Randall Manor.

Just to be safe, we kept ourselves invisible until we reached our carriage. Once we had boarded our carefully hidden getaway vehicle, we were all finally able to take a breath.

After taking a moment to congratulate each other, we quickly set off again. Our carriage headed straight for the home of Duke Berg, which was also Selena’s family home.

Taking Fray to Berg Manor to receive the duke’s protection once we had rescued her had been Selena’s suggestion. As House Berg could boast at least as much influence as House Randall, if not more, we all agreed that Fray would probably be safe there for now. So we decided to take Selena up on her offer.

Finally, we arrived at Berg Manor, a place I had visited a number of times before at Selena’s invitation. Selena seemed to have already spoken to Duke Berg on our behalf. We were smoothly conducted onto the premises and rode the carriage all the way to the front door.

Once we stepped out of our carriage, we found Selena waiting outside for us.

“Lady Katarina, I am so pleased to see that you have returned safely,” said Selena with a smile.

I bowed my head. “Selena, I’m sorry for asking so much of you. I’d like to take you up on your offer and leave Fray in your care, but is it really okay? Are you sure Marquess Randall won’t do anything horrible to you?”

The brief scene I had witnessed with Marquess Randall earlier crossed my mind. Since I had seen him mercilessly dispense violence and hateful words with my own eyes, he seemed even more dangerous than he had when I had only heard about him from others. So I now felt much more reluctant to involve Selena, lest harm came to her as well.

But Selena simply looked perplexed and responded, “You need not worry about that. We are used to being harassed by Marquess Randall.” Then she smiled broadly.

“Huh? You’re used to it?” I repeated, thinking that I must have misheard her.

Selena nodded. “Yes. Ever since my engagement to Prince Ian was confirmed, people from Marquess Randall’s faction have tried all sorts of things. They have insulted me both to my face and behind my back, they have told lies about me, and they have even befouled my dresses.”

This left me at a loss for words. I could not believe what I was hearing. In stark contrast, Selena continued to beam as she spoke.

“Besides, I have a substantial faction of my own. The marquess really cannot do anything to harm me, so I am truly not worried at all.”

Ever since we met during that incident where I was kidnapped and began our friendship, I had faintly developed a certain impression of Selena. I quietly muttered to myself, “Is Selena actually fairly strong-willed?”

Selena’s personal maid, whom I had met a number of times, acted as if I had directed that question at her, and quietly told me, “Yes, my lady. Lady Selena certainly has a stronger will than most. If she were not so resilient, she would not have been able to maintain her status as the fiancée of a prince, with such a large faction around her, for so long.”

When I first met Selena during the kidnapping incident, I saw her in a moment of weakness, having been dragged down by negative emotions after Dark Magic was used on her. But underneath her outward appearance, which was adorable like a small animal, the real Selena was actually quite mentally strong.

Only, back when she was still uncertain about Ian’s feelings, she was more timid, and her enemies had taken advantage of this. Now that she knew how Ian felt, she seemed to be as strong as she could possibly be.

“In the first place, as a result of my position, I have always stood in opposition to Marquess Randall. Throwing one or two more logs on the fire of his enmity really will not make much difference. Father has already granted his permission, so please, leave Fray to me,” urged Selena, placing a hand on her chest for emphasis.

I felt very reassured, and was able to release all of the tension I had been holding in my shoulders. After a moment’s pause, I said, “Thank you, Selena. I will leave Fray in your care.”

“Please do.” Selena grinned.

As another result of Selena's consideration, we were allowed to rest in her family's drawing room. We were told that Fray would be taken to a room with a bed and that a doctor would examine her. Selena had foreseen that Fray might need medical attention and made arrangements in advance for a doctor to be present. I felt like bowing my head to Selena once again.

In the room Selena had prepared for us, we all had a chance to take some tea and breathe sighs of relief. Our infiltration and rescue mission that could not under any circumstances be discovered seemed to have left everyone feeling very tense.

"Everybody, thank you for helping me." I bowed my head to my friends. I had put the four who had accompanied me at particular risk.

"I put my hand up to help, so you don't need to thank me."

"Yes. I did as well."

"Me too."

Keith and Maria both smiled. Nicol, as always, had no expression. Sora simply shrugged, as if he had seen no alternative to coming, then looked at me with a grin on his face.

I really am blessed to have friends like these, huh? As I mulled that over, everyone else who had helped me arrived at Berg Manor.

"Lady Katarina. I am so happy to see that you are safe," cried Mary as she dashed into the room.

"My heart was pounding the whole time," reported Sophia, who came in after Mary with her eyes shining. Finally, Alan arrived, his face drawn and downcast.

"Mary, Sophia, Prince Alan. Thank you. I'm glad you're all okay." I bowed once more.

"No, no. I have done nothing warranting your thanks."

"Actually, it was quite exciting."

"It was really no big deal...but if we do this again, please don't send these two with me."

Mary, Sophia, and Alan each gave their own reply. Upon talking to them a bit more, I learned that Mary had really gotten into the swing of things and put a surprising amount of pressure on the marquess's household with her complaints. Spurred on by this, Sophia had very convincingly played the role of a plaintiff she had read about in a book somewhere. It sounded like she had really nailed the part. However, they were both so enthusiastic that Alan had exhausted himself trying to keep up with them.

While I felt somewhat apologetic for what I had put Alan through, I was just glad to see that they were all safe.

"We did the best we could, but Lady Susanna Randall, whose help Miss Larna requested for us, did a far more amazing job. Can you believe that she set off fireworks in the mansion? Can you believe that?! Even the servants who came to hear our complaints were sent into a panic," recounted Sophia with her eyes sparkling.

Indeed, Larna did decide that we would tell everyone that she had merely *requested* Susanna's help.

"I must say, though I have met Susanna before at a number of soirées, she seemed much calmer than she did today. The thought that she might have such a wild component to her personality never crossed my mind," added Mary, who had made such a strong impression on the Randall household by appearing directly before them to air her grievances.

"I wasn't very well acquainted with Susanna either, so I was shocked too," commented Alan.

"I'm sure she was only doing her best to please Miss Larna, who must have asked her to make a scene. I bet that's what happened," I explained. As the one who had asked Larna to help in the first place, I felt I had a responsibility to ensure that the truth about her did not get out. I was pretty sure that she did not feel ready for that to happen just yet.

While we were talking about how incredible Susanna was and how well Mary's group had performed, and about my group's infiltration of the mansion, Larna arrived.

"Well done, everyone. I'm glad you're all safe," were the first words out of her mouth. From the look on her face, she seemed to be feeling refreshed.

"Thanks to all of your help, Miss Larna, we were able to bring Fray back safely. Thank you so much," I told her.

"Don't thank me. It's all thanks to you, Katarina, for taking action in the first place," Larna replied. Even her eyes were smiling.

I gave Larna my report on how my group and Mary's group had fared. Finally, I reported on Fray's condition. "Thanks to Selena's kindness and consideration, a doctor came to tend to Fray. He said that nothing was wrong with her physically, but she is still sleeping. Thanks to Sarah's Dark Magic, it might be a while longer before she wakes up."

The doctor had not said anything about Dark Magic, but I told

Larna that, when I compared Fray's situation to what had happened with Keith, I thought there was a high probability that things would turn out that way.

In the middle of my explanation, Larna's expression darkened for a moment and she muttered, "So they really did use Dark Magic?" But once she heard that Fray was fine, she looked relieved.

Now that we considered the crisis to be resolved, we returned the magical tools we had borrowed to Larna. As we did so, a knock came at the door.

"Excuse me... Is Fray... Is Fray all right?!" cried Ginger as she tumbled into the room. After we had arrived at Berg Manor, we had contacted her with the news that Fray had been safely rescued. Ginger must have rushed here in a panic as soon as she received the news. Her hair was messy, she was sweating, and she was gasping for breath.

"Ginger, Fray is fine. She's just tired, so she's sleeping at the moment," I declared comfortingly. Ginger's expression turned to one of relief before she went limp and ended up sitting on the floor. Flustered, I ran over to check on her.

"Thank goodness... Thank goodness," Ginger whispered over and over, looking to be on the verge of tears.

To avoid being discovered by Marquess Randall, we had asked Ginger to stay put during our operation. As Ginger knew all too well what had happened between Fray and the marquess, she must have been worried.

I walked over to Ginger, who continued to sniffle, and patted her on the head. At first, she recoiled at my touch, but then her face crumpled up and she looked even more tearful. I thought about continuing to stroke Ginger's hair until she felt better, but there was soon yet another knock at the door and one of the servants of Berg Manor poked his head inside.

"Miss Fray Randall has regained consciousness," he announced. I had expected that it would take Fray a while to awake, just like it had with Keith, but she was already up. Though we were all surprised, our surprise soon turned to relief.

Fray... Thank goodness. After one final checkup by the doctor, who had remained on the premises the whole time, we were told that there was nothing wrong with Fray after all and that we could see her now.

Since we all agreed that it may be too much for Fray, who had

only just woken up, if we all piled in at once, Ginger and I were chosen to go on everybody's behalf. I suggested that Fray would be delighted if Larna went, given how much Fray looked up to her.

Larna just shook her head silently. "I plan on going to see her at a later date, so there's no need right now."

And so Ginger and I were escorted to the room where Fray was resting, but on our way there, we came across Selena, who asked if she could have a moment of our time. Before continuing, she mentioned that she had already been to check on Fray. Apparently the first person on Fray's mind upon waking up was Ginger.

After asking why, Selena learned that Marquess Randall had leveled the following threat against Fray: "If you continue to defy me, I will crush Ginger Tucker's family." This seemed to be one of the reasons why Fray did not feel as if she could escape from Randall Manor herself. So although Fray felt extremely grateful to us for having rescued her, she was worried about whether Ginger and her family were safe.

Hearing this, Ginger bit her lip. If I recalled correctly, Ginger's family were rural nobles and not especially prosperous. It would not take someone of Marquess Randall's means any effort at all to crush them.

However, I could still hardly believe that he would use such a threat. *Just how unpleasant and underhanded are you, Marquess Randall?*

Selena, daughter of House Berg, who could be described as the exact opposite of Marquess Randall, asked, "So, if you do not mind, Miss Ginger, I would like to put your family under our protection as well. What do you say?" She made an incredibly generous suggestion.

"Thank you very much. To be honest, I do not have much of a relationship with my family, so at times I have not really cared what might happen to them. However, I would not want any misfortune to befall the servants of that household, who were so kind to me. Therefore, I hope I can depend on your protection, until I feel that I have managed to repay their kindness." Ginger then bowed to Selena.

Selena smiled warmly and nodded. To me, it looked like a light came from behind her. She was almost like a goddess. After parting ways with Selena, we arrived at the room where we had been told we would find Fray.

After knocking on the door and stepping inside, we did in fact see Fray on the bed at the back of the room. Though we had expected her to still be lying down, she was sitting up.

Her complexion was a little better than it had been when we found her, white as a sheet, at Randall Manor.

Noticing that we had arrived, Fray called out to us, “Lady Katarina, Ginger.”

Then she tried to get out of bed, but I quickly stopped her. “You should probably stay in bed a while longer.”

Fray replied, “No, I have already more or less recovered,” before trying to stand again, but suddenly she found Ginger in front of her.

Ginger paused a moment before speaking. “I heard that father of yours, after all the horrible things he’s done to you, threatened my family to force you to obey...”

Fray looked up at Ginger in surprise. Ginger bit her lip, her eyes full of tears. Fray opened her mouth, but it still took her some time to find words to say.

“Until a little while ago, I had lived my whole life as nothing more than a machine who obeyed the marquess’s instructions. I had never had a friend before. I barely even understood the meaning of the word ‘friend.’ But then I had the chance to talk to you, Ginger. When I spent time with you, I felt happy. I even had fun. Before I knew it, you became someone very precious to me. So I wanted to protect you...”

At these words from Fray, the tears finally started to fall from Ginger’s eyes. She took a moment to collect herself before saying, “It was the same for me. I never really had anyone to spend time with when I was growing up, and I certainly never had a friend. You’re my first real friend... So I worried... I was so worried. When I thought you might never come back, I couldn’t sleep at night...”

Finally, the dam truly burst, and Ginger began to wail loudly as tears poured down her cheeks. As if spurred on by Ginger, Fray began to sob as well, and soon they were both sprawled on the bed, hugging each other and wailing like little children.

However, the sight of these two friends made me smile. I quietly watched over them until they were finished crying.

After a little while, when they had grown calmer, Fray looked up at me, her eyes completely red. “Lady Katarina, thank you so much for rescuing me. You really are my hero.” Next to Fray,

Ginger nodded firmly.

With both of them looking at me, their eyes shining, I felt a bit embarrassed. When Selena came to discuss the girls' future, I let her take my place and left the room behind.

A short way up the corridor, I saw Larna approaching me. She beckoned me toward a nearby corner, then bowed deeply.

"Thank you, Katarina."

"Oh... No, no, I should be saying that to you," I replied.

Larna giggled. "No. If not for you, I wouldn't have taken action in the first place. It's all thanks to you."

I pondered this for a moment. "I really do not think so..."

Larna narrowed her eyes slightly. She then told me, "Although it was worse for Fray, I also spent my childhood being told to obey the marquess. Insults and beatings were everyday occurrences. Still, with the words a certain person once told me in my heart, I started to wrestle with my own feeble will, but perhaps because of the terror that was so deeply etched in my mind, I have still never been able to challenge the marquess head-on."

"Um, but this time, you *did* fight the marquess head-on, Miss Larna. You were so cool."

At the very moment everyone in my group was afraid that we would be discovered, Larna, or rather Susanna, came to save us. She had looked so dignified, I could not imagine her ever losing to someone like Marquess Randall.

When I insisted that this was the case, Larna responded, "Well, that was also thanks to you, Katarina. Spending time with you and hearing the optimistic way in which you speak gave me the courage. That's why I was finally able to face that man."

"Huh?!" *What did I say that was so helpful?* As I goggled in disbelief, Larna giggled with amusement.

She spoke again. "You remind me of the person who gave me courage when I was young."

"The person who gave you courage?" Larna looked really happy when she mentioned this person, so I wanted to know about them.

"Yeah. Though that person isn't around anymore," revealed Larna. Her expression then suddenly became much more solemn.

Feeling apologetic, I said, "Oh, sorry."

"No, don't worry, that's all in the past. Besides, now I have you to give me courage, so I'll be fine." Larna gave me an elegant curtsy befitting a woman of her standing. "Katarina Claes, Larna Smith and Susanna Randall hereby vow to repay the debt they owe you. If you should ever find yourself in trouble again, be sure to ask me for

help."

This almost sounded like an oath that a knight might swear to his lord. I was so stunned that I could only stare back at Larna with a blank expression on my face. She laughed at me again.

By the time I had finished talking to Selena and all of my friends about what would come next, the sun had well and truly set. Keith and I climbed into the carriage that would take us home. As soon as I sat down, my exhaustion finally caught up with me and I slept the whole way home.

While I was sleeping, I had a dream that made me feel nostalgic. My mother in my past life wore an old apron. Though she had been complaining recently about the number of wrinkles on her face, she allowed her face to crinkle up even more as she smiled.

"You two talk and act completely the same. On the inside, you're practically twins," said my mother.

The two of us took a good look at each other, before frowning in exactly the same way and crying in unison, "We are not alike!"

This made my mother smile even more broadly. *Ah, this takes me back.*

"—chan..." I murmured in my sleep.

"Big sister, big sister, wake up. We're home," I heard a voice call out to me. I opened my eyes to see my adopted brother looking back at me. The sight of him pulled me back to reality all at once.

That was my first time dreaming about my past life in a while, huh?

"Big sister?" Keith peered at me with a puzzled look on his face.

"Sorry, I was a bit out of it. I just had a dream," I answered with a shrug.

My kind little brother took me by the hand. "Try not to hurt yourself." Keith led me out of the carriage. We then walked through the all-too-familiar doors of Claes Manor.

I wonder why I had such a dream. Could it have been because Larna told me that I reminded her of the person who first gave her courage? That might have brought back the distant memory of being told how much I resembled my best friend in my past life.

These were the thoughts I had on my mind as I walked into Claes Manor to be greeted by the familiar servants of our household.

"I'm home," I called out to them.

★★★★★★★

"I have completed the Dark Magic task that was assigned to me."

"Well done, Sarah. You can take it easy for a while."

"Yes, master."

After reporting the results of my task to my master, I was told to rest, and so I returned to my room. The request we had received this time had come from a well-connected nobleman. From the wording of the request, it did not sound too difficult: "Make my disobedient daughter listen to me." However, when I actually met the man who had issued the request, I felt unsettled. Watching this client act like he had the right to abuse those weaker than him, and treat people like objects, awakened emotions in me that I was sure I had lost.

With the daughter he had asked me to subdue before me, I looked into her memories as I prepared to cast my Dark Magic on her. What I saw left me even more unsettled. I saw the man's daughter suffering abuse and violence on a daily basis and accepting it passively, like a doll. When I saw this, I could not help but recall the dark days of my own past.

My feelings naturally had an impact on my use of Dark Magic. I could not cast spells as skillfully as I usually would. Such a disturbance had never occurred in the past. I had always managed to execute the instructions I was given dispassionately, without thinking. It was only after I first crossed paths with *that* woman that I began to feel this way. Ever since I met her, somehow things no longer tended to go according to plan.

That was the very thing that was on my mind during this latest mission, as I looked down at the girl and cast my Dark Magic on her. And then almost as if I had summoned her just by thinking about her, *that* woman—Katarina Claes—suddenly appeared before my eyes.

As I stood there, stunned, my Dark Magic started to unravel. Before I knew it, a man was restraining me, but that did not pose much of a problem in and of itself. I knew that I could easily escape those bonds. I was far more concerned about the question of why Katarina was there.

With my mind in a state of confusion, words seemed to slip out of my mouth all by themselves.

“So we meet again.”

“Why did you use Dark Magic on Fray?” Katarina asked me.

“Because I was asked to. The lord of this manor told me to make it so that his daughter would listen to him. But this girl has a strong will. She really put up a fight.”

That much was true. The girl had a surprisingly strong will and I had struggled somewhat to overcome it. Although that was not the main reason I had struggled, there was no need for me to tell Katarina that.

“We don’t want Fray to have to live with this terrible man any longer, so we’ve come to rescue her. We’ll be leaving with her now,” Katarina had declared, before approaching the bed and taking the sleeping girl’s hand. For some reason, this sight left me feeling strangely envious. Why was that? I did not even know what was in my own heart. Did I even still have a heart?

As if brushing away these peculiar feelings, I responded, “Do as you like. I’ve done what I was asked to do, so I don’t care what happens next.”

In response, Katarina extended her hand in invitation. “What will you do? Would you like to come with us?”

As I looked at Katarina’s outstretched hand, I felt a disturbance deep in my chest. Unable to tolerate this feeling, I fled. A moment later, I was back at my master’s place. This was, after all, the place I called home. I was my master’s property.

The desire I had felt to take the hand that was offered to me was obviously nothing more than a momentary lapse in judgment.

★★★★★★★

A few days had passed since we rescued Fray. On that day, when Marquess Randall realized that Fray was missing, he was apparently quite upset and extremely unpleasant to deal with. First of all, the marquess marched straight to Susanna’s door, suspecting her because of the commotion she had caused at his mansion. But Susanna and Jeffrey soon sent him packing. Apparently, a short while later, he found out that Fray was under Duke Berg’s protection.

Duke Berg boldly declared, “A friend of my daughter’s sought my protection, so I gave it to her.” He made no effort to hide it, so Marquess Randall realized what had happened fairly quickly.

Apparently the marquess marched straight to the gates of Berg Manor next, but was repelled in his attempt at retribution.

Even then, Marquess Randall persisted in demanding, “Give me back my child! This is a kidnapping!”

Unfortunately for him, this kingdom firmly acknowledges the rights of people who have achieved the age of majority. This was a law enacted by the current king, in fact. As a result, because Fray, who was legally an adult, had firmly expressed a desire to seek refuge with Duke Berg’s family, there was no legal argument against her staying there.

Therefore, Marquess Randall could do little besides spread nasty rumors—business as usual. But even then, since he was dealing with someone of equal standing—in fact, Duke Berg outranked Marquess Randall, who had only sullied his reputation further by storming over to Prince Jeffrey’s residence to rant and rave at him—this had not gone well for the marquess, leaving him thoroughly disconcerted.

Now that Fray and Ginger were under Duke Berg’s guardianship, they were well protected and could continue their lives at the academy without needing to worry about Marquess Randall’s underlings getting anywhere near them.

I felt quite relieved myself. Although Marquess Randall was still fixated on Fray and Ginger, he would no longer be able to harass them. They would both be able to return to their normal lives as students.

Well, I’m glad. I really am. I wiped the sweat from my brow with a handkerchief as I remarked at how much work I was getting done in the garden today.

Suddenly, I heard a voice say, “Katarina.” It was a voice I knew very well. I turned around to see that it was Jeord, just as I thought, who came walking up to me with a big smile on his face.

“Prince Jeord. Is everything back to normal now for you too?” I had only heard a short while earlier that, a few days after we rescued Fray, the underlings Marquess Randall had sent to surround Jeord had finally left the castle.

“Yes. All thanks to you, Katarina,” replied Jeord with a wistful look in his eyes.

“No, it was thanks to everybody. But I am glad to see the color back in your cheeks, Prince Jeord. If you carried on much longer the way you were, I am sure you would have collapsed. Please do

not push yourself so hard ever again."

For a moment, Jeord looked surprised by what I had just said, but then his gentle smile returned. It was not the smile he usually wore in high society, but a genuinely happy smile.

"You can always see right through me, Katarina. I understand. Next time I am in trouble, I will try asking you for help."

"Yes. Please do. Come *straight* to me," I commanded, holding my head high.

Jeord held out his long arms and embraced me. Then he whispered in my ear, "He he he. Looks like I already have," while chuckling.

I felt ticklish and embarrassed for some reason. My blood suddenly rushed to my head.

"All right. That is quite enough. I am willing to be lenient, since you have not seen each other in a while, but I will not allow any more of that."

"Huh, Mary? When did you get here?"

Mary, who had arrived without our noticing, pried Jeord and me apart.

"If you let a man get close to you, even for a moment, you'll soon end up like that. Come now, big sister, please be more careful," nagged Keith, who came and pulled me even further away from Jeord.

"That's right, Jeord. You should show more—what's the word—modesty," Alan chimed in. But immediately after he said this, Jeord glanced sharply at Alan, and he quickly backed away.

"Jeord, you really hung in there, didn't you?" commented Nicol, expressionless as ever while giving Jeord these words of commendation.

"Lady Katarina, please take a look. Here is a new romance novel that I recommend." Sophia brandished a book at me while seemingly not paying much attention to what was going on around her, as always.

"I made us some snacks. Please eat some," urged Maria, who came bearing a basket and a smile. I had finally returned to everyday life. The coming days would be just as wonderful as usual.

At first, Jeord scowled at this interruption, but he soon appeared to be enjoying himself as well.

From the bottom of my heart, I wished that these happy days with all my friends could continue.

Back to Everyday Life

"Prince Jeord, a letter has arrived for you," said a servant who had been with me for a long time, before presenting it to me. For the last little while, I had been swarmed by Marquess Randall's underlings, leaving me feeling very tense. Now that I was once again surrounded by my usual staff, I finally felt able to relax.

"Thank you very much." I accepted the letter, and as soon as I looked at the writing on the back of the envelope, I was overcome by a feeling of happiness. This handwriting belonged to the one I loved.

I immediately extracted the envelope's contents to see what the message was. It began with the heading, "Invitation to a Thank You Tea Party."

It would appear that a party to thank everyone for their efforts in resolving the recent incident involving Marquess Randall would be held at Claes Manor. To that end, apparently our hostess wanted to know which day would be most convenient for her guests. More often than not, an invitation to a tea party would specify the day, but when it came to her, she was much more likely to start by asking when her guests were available.

People who did not know her very well often got the impression that she tended to move things along all by herself, but the truth was that she was really quite thoughtful toward others.

She was, of course, extremely dim when it came to romance, but sharp when it came to other matters, be it someone's physical condition or the secrets in their hearts. She was probably planning this tea party in that same spirit of consideration.

I gently traced my finger along her signature: "Katarina Claes." It was strange, but that alone gave me a warm feeling. In all honesty, those days when I was hounded by Marquess Randall's men and could not see Katarina were really quite difficult, but I know that Jeord Stuart cannot appear to be exhausted by something so trivial. Even more than usual, I steeled myself and pretended that everything was normal.

I was aware of the fact that I sometimes pushed myself a little too hard to maintain the image others had of me as the “perfect prince,” which had taken hold when I was very young. But after all these years, I could not bring myself to show any weakness that would betray the fact that I was not perfect. As a result, I sometimes exhausted myself.

With a bit of acting, I managed to hide my fatigue very well. This encouraged observers to describe me as “perfect” even more frequently, creating a vicious circle.

However, Katarina was the one person who could see through me. Despite my usual act always managing to fool my servants and even my twin brother, Katarina had seen through it immediately. Each time she caught me acting out my role, she would tell me not to push myself too hard. After she pouted and got angry, she would inevitably reveal that she was worried about me. She was always like that, ever since we were little.

One day, wondering how Katarina always managed to see through me, I asked her, “How?”

With a look of surprise on her face, Katarina answered, “How did I know, you mean? I could tell just by looking,” acting as if she had done nothing out of the ordinary. After that, she continued to see through my act time and time again. Of all people, it was my own fiancée, the one I was meant to protect, who uncovered this fragile side to Jeord Stuart, the supposedly perfect prince.

At first, I fretted over this slightly, but eventually I came to find it reassuring, and even delightful. I realized that it was actually a wonderful thing to have someone who knew the real me.

There was no need for me to put on airs around Katarina. I knew that even if I was not perfect, she would not forsake me, so I never felt more comfortable than when I was by Katarina’s side. When I was with her, even my fatigue seemed to float away. That is why I felt that I had to endure the days when I could not see Katarina.

In the end, I was not able to hold on. When I heard that Katarina might be about to do something dangerous yet again, I assumed a perfect disguise and rushed to her side, but she immediately knew that it was me.

Once again, after seeing Katarina realize who I really was despite my pretenses, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, I felt strongly attracted to her. This had happened so many

times that I had long since lost count.

When I first approached Katarina Claes all those years ago, it was because, for some reason I could not explain, she just seemed *interesting* to me. But before I knew it, she came to occupy a considerable portion of my heart. I was more attracted to her than I ever thought possible, and each time I thought I could not be any more drawn to her, my attraction deepened once again. One day, I suddenly found that Katarina was no longer someone I could live without. I even came to think that there was nothing I would not do to stay by Katarina's side.

There is nothing that I fear more than the thought of Katarina being hurt. Whenever I even consider that something bad might happen to her, I can feel the blood drain out of my body.

That was why I accepted the role I had to play in the recent incident with Marquess Randall, believing that it would help Katarina to avoid danger. But the outcome of the episode was not entirely satisfactory.

It was soon after Marquess Randall's underlings withdrew from the castle that Jeffrey came to apologize to me.

"Sorry, Jeord. I put quite a burden on you but, in the end, I could not get ahold of whoever was behind Marquess Randall," reported Jeffrey. He was normally so easygoing, but today his face was grave as he apologized and bowed his head.

The irksome enemy working behind Marquess Randall, the one we had worked so hard to flush out during this incident, had apparently cut ties with the marquess after learning that his audacity had ended in such a colossal blunder. The shadowy figure then executed a flawless disappearing act, so that no matter how hard we searched, no evidence turned up.

In all honesty, having borne a significant burden myself, I was shocked to hear that our efforts were not rewarded. If even Jeffrey, with all his prowess, could not catch this enemy's tail, then we really were dealing with someone formidable. Maybe this failure was unavoidable.

"If you could not track down the figure in the shadows, then it would have been absolutely impossible for me. Perhaps it could not be helped," I finally said in response to Jeffrey.

Jeffrey opened his eyes wide and responded, "I'm pleased to hear you rate me so highly. Thank you." His expression softened somewhat, but then became grave again. He declared, "These

events have shown me one thing. It looks like our enemy is a fair bit more troublesome than we had previously imagined. I intend to keep my wits about me and pay closer attention to my surroundings. I want you to be careful too, Jeord."

If my highly capable elder brother, who always seemed to take things in stride, felt the need to issue such a warning, then this enemy really must be dangerous. I slowly nodded my assent to Jeffrey.

I intended to use everything at my disposal to protect the one dearest to me. After all, if anything happened to her, I do not think that I could go on living. Katarina...

Following my conversation with Jeffrey, I resolved to covertly place guards and sentinels around Katarina. Only, it seemed that Duke Claes had already deployed men to serve in that capacity, so I obtained his permission first. It was at times like this that I was glad to be Katarina's fiancé. Though there were many who pined for the almost unbelievably alluring Katarina, I was thankful beyond measure to be the only one who could confidently stand by her side.

Katarina, I swear that I will protect you, no matter what it takes. I gently traced my finger across the signature at the bottom of her letter one more time before I began to write my response.

★★★★★★★

On the day of the tea party, I headed for Claes Manor bearing gifts. Just as I had expected, the other guests were already there. Although the letter had not specified who else was invited, I predicted that Katarina would probably have over all the usual members of our circle, and I was not surprised. In fact, after seeing Alan—my twin brother—get ready for the party today, I felt more or less certain.

Alan came escorting Mary Hunt, his lord and master who was also his fiancée in name only. As I looked at my brother warmly, I could not help but think to myself that Mary had really trained him well over the years.

Besides those two, I spied the Ascart siblings, Maria Campbell, and finally Katarina's adopted brother Keith. This really was the usual crowd.

Incidentally, according to Katarina, she also asked her colleague Sora Smith, but he had declined, saying that he was too humble a man to be counted among such guests. Although I was of course used to this social group, the truth was that with the inclusion of me and Alan, this really was a gathering of the upper echelon of the kingdom.

Katarina, who was beloved by everyone in attendance, announced, “I have prepared the most delicious treats to satisfy everyone’s palate,” as she gestured at the table that had been set and smiled from cheek to cheek. “We have every kind of snack, from salty to sweet. We also have many varieties of tea, so please have whichever you like best,” continued Katarina, still smiling broadly.

I knew that she loved to snack. It looked like she had worked tirelessly to select the incredible range of treats that were arranged so beautifully on the table. I felt Katarina’s gratitude toward everyone gathered here, and a feeling of warmth suffused my chest.

Once everyone was seated, Katarina declared, “I really must thank you all for all of your help in rescuing Fray. I couldn’t have done anything by myself. It’s all thanks to you.” She then bowed her head.

“I have already received my proper thanks following that event. Once was plenty. Let us make the most of the fact that we are all gathered here today and have fun.” Mary, who had been sure to reserve the seat on Katarina’s left, smiled.

“Thank you,” replied Katarina, as her own expression softened. Katarina went on to tell us that Fray Randall and Ginger Tucker were doing well under Duke Berg’s guardianship. House Berg, who had helped us so much, had also spent the last few days without any problems. Selena, too, was well.

Incidentally, during all of this, my elder brother Ian was apparently not enthusiastic about offering protection to Fray at first, worrying that it might put Selena in danger. But after seeing Selena’s inner strength and initiative, apparently Ian, who was already head over heels in love with her, felt even more strongly attracted to her. Their relationship was strengthened as a result.

Though part of me did not want to hear such things about my elder brother, deep down, I envied him.

After giving a full account of these events, Katarina started to gobble the sweets that Maria had brought, and soon proclaimed her

approval. Leaning across the table, Katarina extolled Maria's virtues, causing her to blush. The two of them almost looked like starstruck lovers in this moment, which was not a sight I relished.

In the first place, Maria's skill in making sweets, coupled with her calm personality, had led Katarina to become extremely fond of her. Maria seemed to be just as fond of Katarina, so I was always secretly quite wary of Maria, wondering if she might become a romantic rival. Unfortunately, shortly after I cleverly jumped into their conversation, thinking that this would afford me the opportunity to speak to Katarina, Sophia opened her mouth and started talking about a novel.

From what I was able to overhear, I found myself doubting that it was something that the daughter of a noble house ought to be reading. I could not help but turn to look at her brother, Nicol, but he had a far-off look in his eyes, as if trying to escape this reality. I thought to myself that he should learn from Mary and Alan, and train his sister a little better.

In contrast to the conversation between Katarina and Maria, where I had managed to join in, I could not get a word in edgewise during Sophia's rapid-fire, passionate speech. She eventually desisted, but then Mary spoke up.

"Lady Katarina. Recently, I have begun studying a form of massage used to relieve tiredness. Would you mind if I tried it out on you?"

"You're going to give me a massage? How nice," answered Katarina, looking genuinely pleased.

I was suddenly struck by a feeling of concern, but before I could call out, Alan spoke first. He asked, "Hey, Mary. By massage, do you mean that thing you forced me to help you practice the other day?" Apparently the master had already practiced this technique on her minion. They must have a pretty good relationship.

"Yes, though that was a simplified version. I will give Lady Katarina a much more thorough massage."

"You're going to do that *more* thoroughly?! Wait a minute, Mary. At that point, wouldn't it become something else entirely?!" Alan began to panic, his face turning bright red.

What on earth were those two practicing? More importantly, I absolutely refused to let Mary give Katarina this "massage." In my mind, I resolved to stop her.

"Lady Mary, you need not trouble yourself. As Katarina's

adopted brother, I will give her a massage in your place. Please feel free to give Alan, your fiancé, another massage," interjected Keith. Unsurprisingly, he sought to stop Mary from giving Katarina a massage. But I could not permit him to do it either.

"Keith. I, Katarina's fiancé, will relieve her fatigue. You would do well to find your own fiancée as soon as possible, and perform that service for her instead." I smiled.

"Prince Jeord, it is not proper for men and women to touch each other so casually before marriage. Please leave this to me, a member of Katarina's family," responded Keith, also with a smile.

"Oh? Did you not just suggest that Mary should give Alan a massage? In that case, there would be nothing improper about me doing the same for Katarina, would there?" This riposte left Keith speechless.

"No, no. In the first place, men should not touch women so casually. Please leave it to me, as I, too, am a woman," insisted Mary, the master who had used her minion as a test subject once again entering the fray.

"Huh? But, Lady Mary, you just said you did it for Prince Alan!" countered Keith, hitting the nail on the head.

"It is fine for a woman to do it for a man," asserted Mary, presenting us with a theory we did not really understand.

Then Maria came to compete with us, saying, "Excuse me, but I often used to give my mother massages, so I am fairly good at it."

Finally, Sophia barged in. "In that case, I will study it too! I read a lot of books, so I am sure I can learn to do it very soon! I will practice on my big brother and hone my skills!"

"You're going to practice a skill on me, having only read it in books...?" Nicol looked visibly uncomfortable for once, but Sophia paid him no mind.

Everyone spoke so excitedly that the table soon erupted in pandemonium. Thinking to myself that it would be too much trouble to remain involved in this discussion, I decided to observe it from a safe distance. Then I heard Katarina, who was sitting next to me, quietly chuckle to herself.

"What do you find so amusing?" I asked her.

"I was just thinking about how much fun we're having. Everything's back to normal." She smiled.

"It really is like our everyday lives have returned," I agreed.

Katarina's face lit up. "You're right! That's precisely what I was

thinking! We were of exactly the same mind." Katarina's face looked so adorable at this moment that I felt my heart thump loudly. Then I felt a hot rush of blood to my face.

"Ah, I know what to do! Although I might not look like it, the truth is that I know how to give massages myself. I am not sure whether I am good at it, but perhaps I can try giving you one the next time you feel fatigued, Prince Jeord."

After Katarina said this, my face was too hot to bear. Wasting this rare chance to have a proper conversation with my fiancée, I spent the remainder of the party trying to cool myself down.

Sometimes, the woman I love is really not good for my heart.

Afterword

Hello, everyone. I know it's been a while. My name is Satoru Yamaguchi. *My Next Life as a Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom!* has reached its twelfth volume. Due to various circumstances surrounding my work, there ended up being a gap of more than a year between this volume and the last. I apologize to everyone who waited so patiently.

I threw myself into writing this installment with the intention of making up for this, so I very much hope that you will enjoy reading it.

The story this time ended up centering on Katarina's younger schoolmates from her days at the Academy of Magic. Before now, I had thought a lot about these girls, but now I have finally written about them more thoroughly! This story ended up revealing that, in fact, these girls were...like this! Anyone curious about the characters in question, please read this book.

Now then, in the time between the last volume and this one, a game went on sale, a stage play was produced, and there were all manner of other developments. I really couldn't be happier.

Due to the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, I was unable to see the stage play in person, but I was shown a recording of it and it really moved me.

And next year, there is a movie scheduled to be released! How amazing! Thinking back now, this all began when I started uploading my writing on the website *Shosetsuka ni Naro*. Though I knew that my stories were the work of an amateur, I was so encouraged by the feedback I received that I continued writing. Before I knew it, I had come so far that I could hardly believe it. In fact, when I tell other people about my journey, they tend to say: "You're making that up, aren't you?" Even I think so sometimes. It is thanks to all of you, who read my writing and cheered me on, that my career, despite sounding made up, became a reality. If not for all of you, then I am sure that the author "Satoru Yamaguchi" would not exist today. Thank you all so very much.

Finally, I want to thank the following people: Nami Hidaka-sama, for always drawing such lovely illustrations; the editor in charge of that department; and everyone else who lent their efforts toward the publication of this book. I thank you all from the bottom of my heart. Everyone, thank you so much.

Satoru Yamaguchi

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My Next Life as a Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom! Volume 12
by Satoru Yamaguchi

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